



Using students' creative writing towards decolonising an Academic Literacy curriculum

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Journal of Decolonising Disciplines

Vol 1 No 2 2019

eISSN: 2664-340

Issue DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.35293/jdd.v1i2>

Article DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.35293/jdd.v1i2.34>

Abstract

Following campaigns such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, the role of universities in South Africa has changed dramatically over recent years. Ensuing calls for the decolonisation of education emphasised the importance of community engagement and development to promote social justice and responsibility alongside academic excellence. The Initiative for Creative African Narratives (iCAN) is a response to the ever-increasing need for decolonised curricula, rooted in the local cultural perspective of Ubuntu. As part of the first-year Academic Literacy course at the University of the Free State, students are required to read eight graded readers per semester. The booklets are abridged versions of Western fiction, which I argue reinforces the colonial presence in our curriculum. Rather, South African students need to read local narratives in order to learn about each other from each other. Through the iCAN portal students are empowered to improve curricula by writing their own short stories so that they become not only published writers, but also contributors of material that will be graded and tested so that it can form part of the UFS Academic Literacy curriculum. Thus, students contribute to larger bodies of knowledge through their lived experiences.

The paper will reflect on challenges and opportunities within the iCAN process, from reaching out to students and engaging them through different media and events, to the development and grading of their stories and the publication of quizzes on an online platform in order to produce a transformed Academic Literacy curriculum.

Keywords: decolonisation, creative writing, curriculum transformation, African Literature, Academic Literacy

Introduction

Following campaigns such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, the role of universities in South Africa has changed dramatically over recent years. As Angu (2019: 10) articulates, the transformation of higher education in the country is not a new and intellectual project, but ensuing calls for the decolonisation of education have elevated the importance of community engagement and development to promote social justice and responsibility alongside academic excellence. This was already set out in the Education White Paper 3 of 1997 in the hope that the inequalities and fragmentation created by the country's unjust past could be overcome. The Initiative for Creative African Narratives (iCAN) is a response to the ever-increasing need for decolonised curricula, steeped in the local cultural perspective of Ubuntu. At the University of the Free State, students are expected to read creative stories (known as graded readers) as part of the extensive reading component of their English Academic Literacy curriculum. The majority of these books, however, are abridged versions of Western fiction, and therefore students are faced with narratives that are foreign to their cultures and surroundings. As Kumalo (2020: 2) puts it: 'South African contemporary reality is informed by the historical encounters of colonialism, apartheid and contemporary coloniality.' The iCAN promotes change in society and curricula by motivating students to write their own stories, which are then included in the English Academic Literacy learning material to allow students to learn more about local cultures and perspectives. One intention of the White Paper is to address and redress historical injustices. In my attempt to initiate curriculum transformation, I identified the lack of local content offering in the extensive reading component of the Academic Literacy curriculum as a problem. The desired change, which is to decolonise this curriculum, is introduced by using students' creative texts (short stories). The primary evaluation goal therefore relates to curriculum transformation. This paper first depicts the need for change in this specific curriculum before highlighting the challenges faced, and opportunities created by the iCAN.

The need for change in the current teaching and learning context

Extensive reading is an approach used when readers who are not mother-tongue speakers of English read English books and materials that are within their linguistic competence to broaden their understanding of the language (Kluyts 2017: 36).

Canal and Swain's description of this competence (in Newby 2011) is based on four categories:

1. *grammatical competence: knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence grammar, semantics and phonology;*
2. *sociolinguistic competence: the ability to communicate appropriately in a variety of contexts; this includes both verbal and non-verbal communication;*
3. *discourse competence: the ability to use language which goes beyond the level of the sentence; this includes aspects such as cohesion and coherence; and*
4. *strategic competence: appropriate use of communication strategies to overcome or repair breakdowns in communication, due perhaps to lack of linguistic competence. (Newby 2011: 22)*

As part of the first-year Academic Literacy course at the University of the Free State, students are required to read eight graded readers per semester. The booklets, which are abridged versions of Western fiction, reinforce the colonial presence in our curriculum. Angu (2018: 15) points out that, in our South African context, 'the restoration of a socially just society has been limited mainly to resource redistribution', and this can be seen in the current curriculum of the academic course referred to above. It is important to note here that the goal of the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the UFS (which manages and teaches the Academic Literacy courses) is not to discard the international texts, but to find a balance between local and foreign offerings. One of the cornerstones of extensive reading is to provide the students with a choice. According to Stoller (2015: 153), students who can exercise a choice in what they read may be empowered and become more engaged in reading.

The extensive reading component of the UFS's Academic Literacy courses makes use of an online system called MReader (MReader.org), an initiative of the Extensive Reading Foundation, which contains graded readers that are written at different levels of language input, ranging from Level 1 (beginner) to Level 5 (advanced). The goal is to increase students' English language proficiency. This is very important to the students, since 78% of the UFS's cohort is registered on Level 3 (intermediate), Level 2 (lower intermediate) or Level 1. It is safe to say that these students would find extensive reading less challenging if they had more options to choose from. Matsie (2018), who conducted research on the student cohort that utilises the Reading Lab on the Mahikeng Campus of the North-West University, found that 56% of the

students indicated that they would rather read local than international stories.

Kluyts (2017: 38) found that the specific titles chosen by UFS students painted a fascinating picture. Based on their selection from a list of the ten most frequently read stories on the MReader, the four most popular titles belonged to the mystery or thriller genres. However, Kluyts' analysis of the ten most frequently read African texts showed a distinct absence of titles in these two genres and more interest in stories based on true events. Another finding was that not one of the ten most frequently read titles on MReader was an African text, which clearly showed that the students could not exercise their own preference when selecting stories. This could also indicate that students do not have much choice with regard to local stories as only about 15 of the approximately 1 800 titles available on MReader are relevant to the African context (with the majority of these being renditions of Nelson Mandela's biography). This offering and the inclusion of African texts in a program like MReader poses an opportunity for future research.

Table 1 below illustrates this reinforcement of the colonial presence in the curriculum:

Table 1: Ten titles most frequently read by UFS Academic Literacy students in 2017

Genre	Title	Responses
Mystery	A tidy ghost	669
Thriller	Blood ties	673
Young adult	Bullring kid and country cowboy	578
Sport/Drama	Cinderella man	616
Comedy	Mr Bean in town	529
Thriller	Psycho	835
Romance	Romeo and Juliet	598
Thriller	Strangers on a train	620
Mystery	Sunnyvista City	583

One particular finding in Mathobela's (2018: 11) report on student experiences of MReader points towards students' need to make an active contribution by writing their own local stories for the MReader library.

In addition, South African students need to read local narratives in order to

learn about one another from one another. The discussions around the abjection of identities within local historically white universities highlight the need for the youth to realise their own humanity. Kumalo (2018: 3) explains that, within environments that oppress individual identities, it becomes paramount for us to 'critically examine the emancipatory potentialities and resistance strategies available to the negated Being in reasserting their humanity'. It is therefore important that students should not merely 'write back' to imperial narrative, but freely express themselves, thus writing themselves free from mental incarceration. With the iCAN, students are empowered to improve the curriculum by writing and publishing their own short stories, thereby contributing to larger bodies of knowledge through their lived experiences. This research was prompted by the realisation that students need to actively participate in exploring cultural diversity through story-writing while developing their English proficiency and academic literacy abilities. The primary goal of my research was to investigate the extent to which the students' creative writing activities in the iCAN promote a decolonised Academic Literacy curriculum.

Research design

For the purpose of this research, I applied a multistage mixed methods evaluation design (Ivankova, Cresswell & Plano Clark 2016: 321), which allows for the concurrent and sequential collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data in order to provide authentic insights in response to the research question. During the needs assessment phase, a thematic content analysis of the extensive reading curriculum on offer was followed by a questionnaire administered to investigate students' perceptions of their extensive reading curriculum. Their suggested changes to said curriculum were also explored. The impact assessment phase followed four data analysis stages: i) An initial content analysis of students' draft stories; ii) a reading level and readability test; iii) a story-relevance evaluation and iv) an interpretation based on qualitative and quantitative results to suggest ways of promoting creativity and cultural diversity in a decolonised extensive reading curriculum (cf. Figure 1).

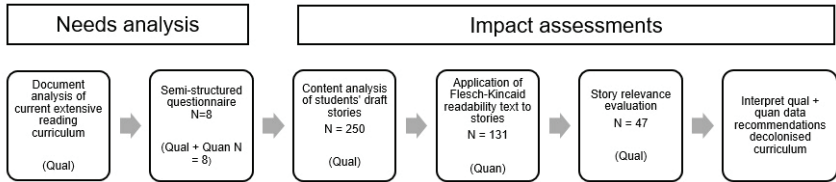


Figure 1: Notation system diagram of the multistage evaluation design
Data collection and analysis

The purpose of this sampling was to establish first-year students' impression of the content currently offered in our extensive reading component (MReader) of the Academic Literacy course. I also deemed it important to gauge their general attitude towards reading and hear their suggestions about desired curriculum changes.¹

Design: The semi-structured questionnaire followed a mixed evaluation design that allowed for the concurrent collection of quantitative and qualitative data.

Sampling: Through stratified, purposeful sampling I identified a sample population of eight students from a class of 30 on the South Campus of the UFS (Patton, cited by Cresswell 2014: 86). The eight students were registered in the EALH (English Academic Literacy for Humanities) 1508 course and the sample (N = 8) represented reading levels 1 to 4 on the MReader scale. Although small, this sample was representative of the reading levels according to which students were classified. This sample population also represented diversity in terms of gender and race as it included one white and five black females, and one black and one white male.

Instrumentation: The semi-structured questionnaire consisted of five structured questions and one open-ended question. The following questions were asked in the

¹ Students participated in this process voluntarily. Ethical clearance to conduct the questionnaire was obtained (UFS-HSD 2017/1518).

survey:

- Do you enjoy reading in general?
- Do you enjoy the books that form part of the content offering in the MReader? Why / why not?
- Which of the books you read during this semester was your favourite?
- Which of the books you read this semester was your least favourite?
- Can you think of any changes that need to be made to the content offering? If so, please tell me more about it.
- Do you have any additional comments about the extensive reading component of the Academic Literacy course?

Data collection procedures: I distributed the questionnaire to the students on Wednesday, 23 May 2018, immediately after class in the venue on South Campus where the class was presented.

Data analysis:

Table 2: First-year student experience of reading²

Student	Do you enjoy reading?	Do you enjoy the current M-reader books?	What was your most favourite book?	What was your least favourite book?
Hlase, P	Yes	Yes	Different world	Appollo's Gold
Radebe, S	No	No	Ned Keller	Harry's holiday
Cockerill, R	No	Yes	Black cat and other stories	New York
Mazizi, O	No	Yes	Two lives	Skyjack
Mhura, L	No	Yes	Eye of the storm	Granford
Khabola, K	Yes	Yes	Dancing with strangers	The dubious legacy
Abrahamse, S	No	Indecisive	Crime story	Forrest Gump
Mekgwé, F	Yes	Yes	Milo	The interpreter

² Students participated in this process voluntarily. Ethical clearance to conduct the questionnaire was obtained (UFS-HSD 2017/1518).

Although five of the eight respondents indicated that they generally do not enjoy reading, six indicated that they enjoyed reading the current MReader books. This response could have been prompted by the fact that reading the MReader books on offer was compulsory. Regarding the respondents' comments about possible future changes, one was of the opinion that some of the stories were outdated and that books older than eight years were therefore 'not so popular' and should be discarded. Another expressed a desire for local content: 'Some of the books can be stories based in South Africa which explore our culture or relationships.' This respondent also referred to the 'difficult and uninteresting story lines' of vampire and ghost stories and added: 'I think there must be more stories about the youth.' A third respondent felt that the current offering 'could be more interesting', while another referred to the stories of a historical nature as being 'vague'. These comments suggested that the international texts on offer did not resonate well with the students.

All eight respondents were able to identify their favourite and least favourite books read during the first semester, which points to their involvement in the compulsory graded reader component of the Academic Literacy course. A belief that the extensive reading component aids students academically is enforced by comments such as '[the texts] actually enhance my learning [sic]', that the books 'guide me [sic] to improve learning and understanding English much better' and that the readers 'improve my vocabulary and how to use punctuation marks'. The most popular genres identified by the students included romantic, crime and mystery novels. It is important to note that, of the 14 titles listed by the students (cf. Table 1), not one was set in South Africa.

Short stories evaluation

The purpose of collecting short stories written by students is to create a repository of culturally diverse and decolonised texts suitable for the extensive reading component of the Academic Literacy course. Should anyone wonder why students are not simply introduced to works by South African writers, it should be remembered that the iCAN project wants to empower students by transforming them from being users to becoming contributors, and that in the Academic Literacy courses students have to read shorter (or abridged) texts and the goal is not to summarise the published works of local writers, which could become another project.

Design: A mixed methods evaluation design was followed using first a quantitative and then a qualitative text analysis.

Sampling: Purposeful sampling was done of 10 stories according to three themes, namely love, abuse and campus life, which were the most common themes in the students' writing. These themes reveal a great deal about the lived experiences of our students and I am currently busy with further research on this.

Instrumentation: Hayot (cited in Burger 2017) suggests five mechanisms to describe and compare the 'worldedness' of literary texts, namely amplitude, completeness, metadiegetic structure, connectedness and character system. Amplitude refers to what happens in the fore- and background of a story and the distance between the two, and completeness covers the scope of the fictional world that is described. Metadiegetic structure deals with the blueprint of a story, i.e. how characters and events are linked, themes, etc.; connectedness addresses the connection between the real and the fictional world; and character system is defined as the relationships between characters and their involvement in narration and events in the story.

In developing the story-relevance grid (cf. Figure 2), each of the mechanisms described were linked to the six traditional elements of a short story, i.e. setting, character, plot, conflict, theme and style, in order to determine whether students' stories met the creative selection criteria mentioned earlier. I used the story-relevance grid as a qualitative measuring instrument to analyse the appropriateness of students' stories in promoting cultural diversity and decolonisation. The measuring of the impact of students' creativity was of paramount importance. Unlike descriptive essays and biographies, their stories had to answer to specified creativity criteria in order to contribute to the decolonisation of the extended reading curriculum of the Academic Literacy course.

Setting	Character	Plot	Conflict	Theme	Style
Amplitude (The relationship of events in the fore- and back-ground)	Character system (Characters' involvement in the narration and plot)	Amplitude (The gap between fore- and back-ground)	Metadiegetic structure (The connection between characters – events – space)	Metadiegetic structure (Interpretation of texts)	Completeness (Semantic and logical ability to portray a complete fictional world)
Completeness (Is a whole fictional world created?)		Metadiegetic structure (Blueprint of the story)	Character system (Links between characters)		
		Connectedness (Connection between the real and fictional worlds)			

Figure 2: Story-relevance grid

Data collection: After administering the student questionnaire, I instigated the process of sourcing locally produced short stories from the UFS students by means of a campaign launched across campuses (via the UFS Blackboard website, word of mouth and posters). The campaign enabled the ‘Get rewarded for your words’ initiative. These rewards were mini-bursaries of R500, paid directly into the students’ university accounts, for every text that was accepted. Students submitted stories written according to my prescribed guidelines regarding length and format.

Data analysis: A published author and former UFS student (Ace Moloji) and I had to vet 250 story submissions of which 131 were then edited or reworked and 47 were finally published in the iCAN anthology. A sample of 10 stories was assessed for readability and story relevance to promote a decolonised and culturally diverse extensive reading curriculum. Purposeful sampling identified 10 short stories that dealt with the themes love, abuse and life on campus. This sample comprised 21.3% of the total collected content in the 2018 iCAN project.

I applied two filters to evaluate the 10 identified short stories. The Flesch-Kincaid test for readability, which measures the level of text difficulty according to word and sentence length was applied as the first filter to assess the students' language usage. The second filter tested their higher-order thinking skills developed by the Academic Literacy courses. The students' analytical, logical and creative thinking skills were specifically relevant to this analysis. An evaluation grid informed by the five mechanisms suggested by Hayot (2011: 141-157) was used to evaluate the presence of these skills in students' stories and the relevance of their creative writing to a culturally diverse and decolonised curriculum.

The formula used for determining the Flesch reading score was $206.835 - (1.015 \times \text{ASL}) - (84.6 \times \text{ASW})$, where ASL stood for average sentence length and ASW for average syllables per word. The higher the score, the easier the text is to understand. The formula used to determine the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score was $(.29 \times \text{ASL}) + (11.8 \times \text{ASW}) - 15.59$ and texts were rated on a U.S. school grade level. If, for example, a text scored 7.0, it meant that a learner in Grade 7 would understand it.

The scores in the grid were correlated to the standards of the Common European Framework of References for Language (CEFR). This correlation was necessary as the English proficiency of students in the Academic Literacy course at the UFS falls within the levels Basic / Beginner English User (A1, A2) to English Independent / Intermediate User (B1, B2) of the CEFR. The student cohort's prescribed textbooks are at these levels.

The texts were made available in Microsoft Word in order to determine their readability and grade level scores (cf. Table 2).

Table 3: Readability and grade level scores of the 10 sampled short stories

Writer	Title	Theme	Readability score	Grade Level	CEFR level
Prins	<i>Blackbird</i>	Abuse	85	5	A2
Mukiwa	<i>The seventh day</i>	Love	82	6	A2
Meyer	<i>Reflection</i>	Campus	85	4	A2
Shabalala	<i>The birthday present</i>	Abuse	87	4	A2

Writer	Title	Theme	Readability score	Grade Level	CEFR level
Mpilwenhle	<i>The story of Unomaphupho</i>	Love	79	6	B1
Scheltema	<i>Frans the hero</i>	Love	78	6	B1
Phosa	<i>Guilty innocence</i>	Campus	83	4	A2
Golele	<i>My journey</i>	Campus	72	7	B1
Radebe	<i>The awakening</i>	Love	76	6	B1
Mobongwa	<i>Cruel love</i>	Abuse	77	6	B1

Hayot (2011: 138) states that literary texts are ‘world creating’ and ‘world relating’. Meditation on the world outside the artwork is of cardinal importance. In the case of this study, students’ lived experiences and their personal perspectives form part of the cornerstone of the iCAN. Hayot (2011) further highlights that the word ‘world’ suggest all corners of the earth, but that many areas, cultures and languages are discarded and we are therefore faced with challenges when ‘world literature’ is studied. ‘To be epistemologically responsible to the world (as planet, globe, universe, or cosmos) is a major cultural and intellectual inheritance of European modernity’ (Hayot 2011: 134). In the tradition of critical social sciences, he advocates for a comparison of literary texts across language, genre, geographical and time barriers to counter Euro- [and Western] centric periodisation. By aiming to balance the prescribed content of the first-year Academic Literacy curriculum with localised texts, I am doing just this.

Title	Theme	Setting	Character	Plot	Conflict	Style
Blackbird	X	0	0	X	X	X
The seventh day	X	X	X	X	X	X
Reflection	X	0	0	X	X	X
The birthday present	X	0	X	X	X	0
The story of Unomaphupho	X	0	X	X	X	X
Frans the hero	X	X	X	X	X	X
Guilty innocence	X	X	X	X	X	X
My journey	X	0	0	X	X	0
The awakening	X	0	0	X	X	X
Cruel love	X	0	0	X	X	X

Figure 3: Story-relevance evaluation grid. In above grid, X = value (the story adheres to the creative criterion) and 0 = no value (the story does not adhere to the creative criterion).

Challenges

Kumalo (2018: 2) expresses his concern about decolonising strategies that are manifesting as another mode of coloniality in tertiary learning institutions, and his wariness may be justified here. The above methodologies for grading the stories and applying the students' texts to the story-relevance evaluation grid can be seen, in the context of decolonising the curriculum, as fundamentally flawed. The Flesch-Kincaid readability test and the use of the standards of the CEFR are methods that might reinforce the 'flow of research from domination by the north' (Leibowitz, Mqgwashu, Kasanda, Lefoka, Lunga, & Kavena Shalyefu 2019: 2). The ideal would be to grade stories according to local standards.

Furthermore, the stories may not be regarded to be on the same literary level as the abridged versions of texts students absorb on the MReader platform. Students simply do not have the skills and experience of the canonised (Western) writers. Therefore, using these stories could be interpreted as a kind of epistemic imposition and this may lead to a rejection of the content (by students or academics). Should this happen, we will observe a silence of the previously unheard voice, which we are warned against by Tuck and Yang, as well as Nkosi (in Kumalo 2018: 3). The social engagement component of the iCAN does include creative writing workshops and one-on-one writing mentor sessions in an attempt to provide young writers with opportunities to develop their skills.

The final challenge is on a technological level. In order for the University of the Free State to utilise these texts for the purpose of including them in the extensive reading component of the first-year Academic Literacy course, a way must be found for the students to access the texts and tests online. Blackboard, the Learning Management System used by the UFS, does not have the same functions and features as the MReader platform, and since the University does not have access to the MReader platform's backend, the iCAN texts cannot be hosted on MReader. Students' learning may be disrupted if they are required to navigate from one online platform to another.

Opportunities

The University of the Free State identified eight graduate attributes (Strydom & Oosthuizen 2018: 3) necessary to develop a successful student: academic competence, critical thinking, problem solving, oral communication, written communication, ethical reasoning, civic engagement and entrepreneurship. When considering the opportunities presented by the iCAN, it is evident that the project is aligned with its host institution's strategic vision.

Chilisa and Preece (in Leibowitz et al. 2019: 2) refer to attempts by the Southern region (which includes Africa) to decolonise as being based on ethnophilosophy, which is 'a collective worldview(s) encoded in folklore, language, myths, metaphors, taboos, rituals, stories, autoethnography, and community of practices as ways of knowing'. The most obvious opportunity created by the iCAN is the transformation of a curriculum from a collection dominated by Western stories to a South African offering in pursuit of achieving a balance between two bodies of knowledge.

This initiative applies the principle of Ubuntu in the form of community engagement and upliftment. Various creative writing workshops have been hosted across three campuses of the University of the Free State. During these workshops, students shared ideas about writing and learned about the craft from published authors. Workshops are held at residences on campus, thus bringing the academic dialogue into a space where students feel comfortable. Students not only attend and participate in these workshops, but each session is co-presented by a student writer previously published in one of the annual iCAN anthologies. This supports the notion discussed by Kamwangamalu (1999: 25) of a 'bottom-up revival' that sees South Africa bringing together its communities to build the nation.

The mini-bursary awards component of the iCAN, which rewards students financially (made possible by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's investment in the project) for their story submissions, sees students develop a sense of entrepreneurship, which is one of the graduate attributes at the University. They work towards creating a product for which they will be remunerated. This provides them with a sense of self-worth, which improves their overall wellbeing, as is expressed in many emails addressed to the iCAN coordinator (Madi 2019).

Finally, the project is also concerned with student wellness as it makes it possible to identify young writers whose stories attest to experiences that can affect their emotional stability. The iCAN reaches out to those students and puts them in contact with Kowsie Wellness so that they may receive counselling. Thus we nurture students

and contribute to their growth so that they can confidently fulfil their roles in society.

Findings

It was determined that a need exists to stimulate student interests in reading through appropriate and user-friendly stories that appeal to their own cultural experiences, but that also promote an understanding of other cultures. It also became evident that the iCAN project develops students' writing ability. Furthermore, the importance of appropriate assessment instruments was established and finally a need for literary appreciation within a localised context was identified.

Recommendations

The first recommendation pertains to the iCAN process. I have found that the process has worked exceptionally well. In 2018, my expectations of student engagement in the form of story submissions were exceeded by 400% when 250 submissions were received instead of the expected 60. This process can be improved by introducing a mentoring system in which students are assisted on a one-on-one basis so that the story-relevance evaluation grid (cf. Figure 2) can be even more accurately implemented. This will lead to improved stories in the drive to decolonise the current curriculum and re-emphasise 'communal' principles.

Next, the story-relevance evaluation grid worked very well and, as mentioned earlier, the implementation of student writer mentoring will result in the in-depth and more accurate evaluation of stories.

As alluded to before, the Flesch-Kincaid readability and grade level test is a very common instrument applied to texts. The results enabled me to link the texts directly to the English proficiency levels of the students at the UFS. However, as stated above, this instrument, when scrutinised, may be found to be fundamentally flawed. A more localised instrument, set within decolonised methodologies, is needed. It should be borne in mind that the iCAN works with stories told by indigenous people, thereby giving them a voice and validating the importance of local cultures previously marginalised in academia. Esgin, Hersch, Rowley, Gilroy and Newton (2018: 4) argue that decolonising methodologies include both indigenous and non-indigenous stakeholders, and should meet both 'scientific and cultural' rigour. Therefore it can be

argued that by seeking to find a balance between these stakeholders, the iCAN is an attempt at promoting local knowledge in the international arena.

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