"Indigenous students at university: is teaching still a colonising process?"

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Abstract:

As a teacher educator I encourage my students to develop culturally inclusive pedagogies, and also see it as my responsibility to practise them myself. However, I have found that my position as a culturally inclusive practitioner is rarely tested in my work in a university setting. While universities are welcoming increasingly diverse groups of students into their midst, most of the students I encounter share cultural capital with me. This paper is an exploration of a 'critical incident' when the presence in my class of an Indigenous Australian student; a culturally "different" student; challenged me to act according to my stated position as a culturally inclusive teacher. I shall outline my reflections on this experience, using post-colonial theory as a framework to examine the colonising nature of my pedagogy, and invite discussion of the possibilities for a more culturally inclusive definition of what is acceptable as teaching and learning in universities.

Framing the conversation.

I think teaching is fascinating and love talking about it, and presenting this paper is a way of having a conversation with a larger group of people than usual. To frame the conversation, about an event in one of my classes which gave me much food for thought, I have used three of Brookfield’s ‘four critically reflective lenses’. At different points in the paper I ‘consult my own autobiography as a teacher and learner’, I ‘look through one of my students' eyes’, and use ‘theoretical literature ... to help understand the experience’. The fourth lens will come into play when I engage you, my colleagues, in a 'critical conversation' (Brookfield, 1995: 29-30).
Teaching - a culturally specific activity.

Working as a teacher educator, I am interested in the social and cultural influences on teaching and learning. For me, the social and cultural contexts in which teaching and learning take place are as significant as psychological factors (such as motivation or self esteem) in influencing the outcomes of education at any level. Because of this, one of my professional goals is to develop and practise culturally inclusive pedagogies myself so that my students have the chance to observe and critique these practises.

My present orientation to teaching has been influenced by reading in the areas of post-structuralism and post-colonialism. I now recognise more clearly how my own early experiences of learning, as a member of a privileged group in classrooms and lecture theatres, not only contributed to my success, but also positioned me to view myself as the 'norm' in an academic environment. I now see it as necessary to interrogate the legitimacy of my powerful position as 'lecturer', and to re-examine my attempts to practice in a culturally inclusive way.

In teaching about teaching, as well as when reflecting on my own teaching, I draw on post-structural and post-colonial theory to explain what is happening in my classrooms. I understand teaching and learning as both value-laden and as culturally-specific activities (Brandt, 1986:142-143; Hatton, 1998:3-15). In using the term 'culturally-specific', I am thinking of both the cultural specificity of the society in which the teaching and learning take place (so that teaching and learning in an English university will have culturally specific characteristics because of the institution's English location), and to the culturally specific nature of the institution itself (so that the practices of a primary school will be culturally different from the practices of a university, and the practices found in formal educational settings will differ from those of informal settings). Of course, there also exists a synergy between the culture of the society and the culture of the institution, since educational institutions exist largely to promote the valued practices and attitudes of the wider society of which they are a part. In educational institutions, dominant cultural values are valorised not only through curriculum content, but also through pedagogy.

The cultural practices of institutions are reproduced and reinforced by a system which recruits from within, so that for example university academics are usually people who have been successful students within the system which then recruits them as academics (Becher, 1989; Pearce, Stewart, Garrigan & Ferguson, 1996). Arguably, it is difficult to promote cultural diversity at an institutional level when these systems work to reproduce the dominant cultures in educational institutions. In fact cultural capital is doubly significant for academics. Not only are academics drawn from within a culturally narrow group of people in the institutional sense, it has been argued that they are also culturally dominant members of the wider society. For example, Gramsci conceptualises academics as ‘conservative’ intellectuals who operate within the status quo and provide ‘the ruling classes with rationales for economic, political and ethical formations’ (Giroux, 1988: 151). However, as writers such as Yeatman (1995) have pointed out, changes in the cultural composition of the student body in universities demand both an increased tolerance of socio-cultural complexity in general, and ... skills in intercultural communication in particular” (Yeatman 1995: 195). If this is the case, the question of how to negotiate cultural difference is a question for all academics, not just for cultural theorists. In the following discussion, I explore some possibilities for addressing this dilemma in relation to a core academic activity.

The critical incident.

I shall focus in particular on the culturally specific nature of teaching practices in an Australian university, and draw on a critical incident which occurred when I was teaching a unit entitled
Aborigines and Education, offered by Murdoch University's School of Education. The unit is designed to raise student teachers' and practising teachers' awareness of the many issues which affect Indigenous students' learning in mainstream classrooms in Australia. In particular, students are asked to explore the differences in culture, learning and values between the mainstream, non-Indigenous students in Australian classrooms and their Indigenous counterparts. It is a forthright and uncompromising unit, making as much use of writing and presentations by Indigenous people as possible, and locating the present educational provision for Indigenous people in the context of a history of oppressive and racist policies and practices. A strong theme in the unit is that the practices of teaching are highly culturally specific, and that in order to achieve a more inclusive education for Indigenous students it is not enough just to be sympathetic, or merely include Indigenous studies in the curriculum. Rather, non-Indigenous teachers must also explore the processes of teaching which they employ, and must be ready to change their practices to make them more culturally congruent with Indigenous cultures and values. Last year, when two Indigenous Australian students enrolled to study Aborigines and Education, I realised not only that this was a good opportunity for me to exemplify some alternative practices, but also that, given my publicly stated position as a teacher who aimed to be culturally inclusive, my credibility (and ethical position) would be compromised unless I could demonstrate in practice my support of the cultural values and learning styles of the Indigenous students in the group.

Students present a tutorial on one of a number of given topics as part of their assessed work for this unit. Wayne Turner, one of the Indigenous students in the group, opted for the topic 'Anti-racist teaching' for his tutorial. Knowing that the student with whom he was sharing the topic was going to talk about how to teach in an anti-racist way, he decided to "talk about the other side of it, about what I'd experienced in my education....I thought it was important to explain what I faced as I was growing up as an Indigenous child."

Wayne began by teaching a Torres Straits story, and asked the students to sit in a circle while he explained to them how to make a fish trap.

"I was trying to put across that there's also another way of teaching, not the standard way of teaching with the teacher up the front with desks in rows but there's lots of ways it can be taught."

He then decided to perform a role play about an Indigenous student in the classroom. He wrote a script, and asked me, the tutor, to play the role of the racist teacher, "someone who was picking up all the stereotypes", while he played an Indigenous student whom I held up to ridicule in front of the "class", played by the rest of the tutorial group. The scenario was drawn directly from Wayne's own experiences as an Indigenous child in a mainly white classroom, and the subsequent discussion focused further on the kinds of things which teachers used to say to him, and on how he felt about them. He spoke of the "element of shame" which as an Indigenous child he felt in the classroom, and of the dilemmas this presented.

If one of us (me and my five cousins) did know something, then we wouldn't say it because the others would be saying "Oh, you think you're white, you know everything", and by not speaking up the teacher's thinking "Well he's dumb like the rest of them".

He also spoke of the "big power play" which teachers have.

It was a powerful and successful tutorial, although in many ways it did not conform to "normal" tutorial practices. For one thing, there was no research paper, and no references to readings.
For another, I was an integral part of the presentation, unlike in all the other tutorials when the students had to do it alone. Later, in a debriefing session, Wayne and I discussed some of these issues further and he agreed that I tape the conversation. The following discussion draws on the recording made at the time.

**Exploring the teacher’s cultural difference.**

We spoke first about the nature of my intervention and participation. I was initially concerned about equity issues; about whether the other students thought I’d given an unfair amount of help to a single individual on this occasion. However when we thought about the kinds of help I’d given to other people, such as suggesting readings, or having a conversation about what they might choose to present, or even asking questions in the tutorial to help focus the discussion, it appeared that here was a *different* kind of involvement but not necessarily *more* help than I had given, in different ways, to other people. The discussion then moved on to the culturally specific nature of the "normal" tutorial. It emerged that the reason why Wayne came to me in the first place to ask for help was because he thought he would have to come to ask me for *permission* to do it that way. "I wasn’t sure whether it was right to do it that way, whether I would offend anyone, so that’s why I came and asked."

Underpinning this need to ask for permission is Wayne’s awareness of the need to observe traditional practices; his awareness that certain kinds of things happen in tutorials, and that people in universities expect tutorials to be a certain kind of experience. As he put it, "there’s a traditional thing that people have to be sitting down, and you’re at the front talking, and for your tutorial presentation you have to have a couple of overheads and a handout, a couple of videos......". I found it significant that Wayne interpreted tutorial practices as a set of cultural behaviours ("there’s a traditional thing ... people sitting down .... you’re at the front talking ........ you .. *have a couple of overheads and a handout* and so on), and that his concern was about the need to act within appropriate cultural parameters rather than, as I had wrongly assumed, to maintain appropriate intellectual rigour. This was important for me, for two reasons. First, it made me aware of the hegemonic nature of tutorial practices whereby only certain (academic) practices are ‘allowable’ (in fact I am captured on the tape saying "Yes, we’re just trying to make people pretend to be good little academics"). Have I then taken for granted that these practices are intellectually rigorous simply because they are what academics do? And if so, why should we require all our students to behave like academics? And are the ‘best’ students those whose academic practices match those of their teachers as closely as possible? Second, it made me realise that by assuming the tutorial was primarily a cognitive process, I was making the arrogant assumption of the culturally powerful that this was culturally neutral or even culture-free territory.

Wayne also pointed out that he drew from his own culture not just to devise a culturally different tutorial but also to reconfigure the tutor’s role.

> Basically what I did was I approached you and asked if it was all right to do this. That’s what I’d do back in my own community in a cultural way, you always have to have that permission from the Elders. So in a white classroom you’re the teacher so I still had to go to you, you basically took the same place as the Elder, so I had to go to you and talk it out with you. So I was doing it in a traditional way, drawing from my own culture.

Hence he had not just suggested new possibilities for tutorial practices, he had also depicted for me a kind of teacher-student relationship which I had never imagined. I was reminded that to a culturally ‘different’ student it was I who was the ‘other’. It shames me that the need to explain
my own cultural traditions to Wayne had never entered my head.

Education’s role in the colonising process.

This incident touches on a number of questions for culturally inclusive education. The questions I shall explore here relate to the culturally specific nature of classroom practices, and the ways these practices work to make the classroom a more comfortable space for students who are most capable of conforming to the normalising expectations of its culture than for students who are culturally different. In order to do this I shall discuss some parallels between the process of colonisation, as experienced by Indigenous Australians and as explored by postcolonial theorists, and the process of learning in classrooms. Both of these valorise a particular set of cultural practices.

Cultural historians and postcolonial theorists note that part of the colonial process was to promote the Enlightenment ideals of rationality and maturity (Long 1980; Bhabha, 1994; Gandhi 1998). In Australia, policies and practices, from assimilation via mission schools in which children were forbidden to speak their classical Indigenous languages (Ward, 1995) through to the Stolen Generations, attest to the desire of the authorities to “civilise” by making Indigenous people be more like the whites, by using education practices to limit their behaviour in particular, culturally specific ways, with complete disregard for the fact that well established and highly successful systems of education already existed in Indigenous communities (Benterrak, Muecke and Roe, 1996). One outcome of this was that many Indigenous people felt constrained to adopt the outward signifiers of civilisation in order to interact in positive ways with the colonising community. Education played a major role in this civilising process, serving not only to try to make Indigenous people more white but also to institutionalise the oppositionality of European and Indigenous ways of being.

The process of othering is seen by Bhabha as an essential element in the colonising mission. He identifies the objective of colonial discourse as ‘to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types’, in order to justify conquest and ‘establish systems of ... instruction’ (1994: 70); in other words to render the colonised a homogenous group identifiable in terms of their otherness simply in order to effect the colonising mission. To what extent is this process mirrored in the way university teachers use the othering of students in order to justify what they do? For example, when I see my students as having ‘needs’ which I identify and satisfy, hence employing specific discourses such as those of difference, deficiency, ability, standards, am I actually reproducing and institutionalising an ideology which ensures the students’ continuing dependency on my authority? The colonial rhetoric in which the colonised ‘other’ is depicted as in need of education in order to become civilised provided a set of guiding principles for educational practices in Australia up to the latter half of the last century. The question for me at the start of this new one is: do such embedded notions still exist in my thinking as a teacher, when confronted by culturally different students?

The colonising discourse and academic practices.

We have seen how, in order to justify its educational practices, colonial discourse made use of a series of oppositions such as child/adult, ignorant/cultured and barbaric/civilised. The incident described above raised the question for me whether these process are still, invisibly, being played out in universities. While university teachers may not go so far as to see their students as barbaric, there are aspects of the relationship between the teacher and the student, such as the requirement referred to earlier for the student to ‘pretend’ to be an academic, which mirror colonising processes. I have heard, and joined in with, informal chats between colleagues in corridors and common rooms which employ a discourse depicting students as lacking culture,
literacy, knowledge or dedication and therefore, the assumption is, academic ability. Such
discourse implies a deficit in the student when compared to the teacher’s attributes, in the same
way that the young Wayne’s teachers saw him as deficient. However, if we are to cast
academic practices as culturally specific, and see teaching as part of a broader agenda to
bring subjects (students) into line with the dominant culture, we ought then to ask whether we
can so easily ascribe deficiencies to students on the grounds that they exhibit different
behaviours from ours, when what we see as signifiers of academic ability are also aspects of
cultural practices normalised within the institutions in which we teach.

My own experience of teaching in schools in northern English cities brought me into contact with
students who were maladjusted to the school not because of intellectual disability (although the
common sense view was that this was the source of their ‘problem’) but because of a major
cultural rift between the norms and values of the school and those of the students’ private lives.
For example, a school culture which valued competition and individual achievement worked
against the culture of those students who had learned to value peer approbation more than the
approval of the teacher. Wayne’s experiences as a school student in Australia, whereby his
teachers misread his reluctance to answer - a culturally-specific behaviour - as evidence of his
‘dumbness’, mirror this. Research (for example Malin, 1990a, 1990b) suggests that teachers
respond more favourably to students who are culturally similar to them than to students who are
culturally different. Furthermore, my own reflections on my early years in teaching reveal a clear
motivation to deny evidence of cultural difference trying to make my students as like me as
possible (and this motivation is still evident in the conversation discussed above when I
suggested the tutorial process worked to make students behave like "good little academics"). If
I expect students to be as like me as possible, my behaviour provides the benchmark for their
success.

For most students in Australian universities, this is not a problem. Many students share cultural
capital with their teachers, possessing such attributes as a history of success in educational
settings, a lifelong initiation into dominant cultural practices, and identification with middle class
values. However, for students who, because of their cultural ‘difference’, cannot bring these
attributes to the classroom, the experience is very different. They must either adjust to the
dominant culture of the classroom or forever exist on its margins. It is important to note that, for
the most part, it is the students, not the classrooms, who make the adjustment.

The case for adjustment in the classroom.

Why should it worry us that academic practices have elements in common with colonising
practices? The wider society looks to universities and university academics to make decisions
about standards, and perform gate keeping activities such as marking examinations and
selecting students. If shared understandings exist, both within and outside educational
institutions, about the kinds of practices which are promoted, valued and rewarded by those
institutions, isn’t it our responsibility as academics to maintain these established practices? If
we don’t, do we risk lowering standards?

An aspect of the current debate about standards is reflected in a growing recognition that, in
Australia, universities are changing. University students are becoming increasingly diverse as
groups of people, (Wlodkowski and Ginsberg, 1995; Parliament of Australia, 2000), and
universities are becoming increasingly diverse as institutions (Kemmis et al, 1999). Recent
debate in the Australian national press around evidence that some universities have been
‘lowering standards for some fee-paying students’, with demands being made that academics
work to ensure ‘fair’ (ie ‘uniform’) assessment practices (Moodie, 2001), is further indication of
a problem.
How should universities approach this? While I do not dispute the need for fair selection and assessment practices (although in both cases the notion of ‘fairness’ is contestable), I suggest that to focus solely on what happens at the beginning and end of a person’s university education, and ignore the experiences in between, is to miss part of the point. Even without a post-colonial analysis, if ‘fairness’ is a criterion by which university practices are judged, then an examination of ‘fairness’ in university education which includes pedagogy as well as selection and assessment might be significant in ensuring ‘fairer’ outcomes.

The ‘standpoint’ curriculum model is helpful here. Drawing on Rawls’ theory of social justice, whereby social justice is achieved by putting the interests of the least advantaged members of the society first when considering any social policies, Connell suggests a ‘standpoint’ model for achieving curricular justice by reconstructing the curriculum.

The fundamental principle is that you take the standpoint of the least advantaged. That is where you start from. You think out the education strategies that are in their interests; and implement them. That, in a nutshell, is what is meant by ‘social justice in education’. (Connell, 1994: 308-309, original emphasis)

This approach shows how we might begin to make adjustments to our classrooms. However, I am uncomfortable with Connell’s suggestion that ‘you’ make these decisions on behalf of ‘the least advantaged’. On what basis can we make such decisions?

The critical incident I have described is only a reflection at a local level of what is happening on a bigger scale. I have reflected on my own problem using concepts of ‘diversity’, ‘difference’ and ‘the other’ to help me theorise and understand an aspect of my relationships with students. I now want to explore these concepts further, and ask how far they can go to suggesting a solution both to my local problem and, possibly, the bigger one.

‘Diversity’, ‘difference’ and ‘the other’.

We have seen that the concept of diversity, and the need to provide for diversity, is gaining significance in contemporary discussions about the need to reappraise and reshape university practices to ensure inclusion. However I find the idea of diversity problematic. I have argued above that students who have academic practices in common with those of their teachers are advantaged by their membership of the same (culturally dominant) group in the institution (remembering that teachers and students will also have one or more of race, ethnicity, class, gender, age in common). I have suggested that institutional practices assume a deficiency in those who fall outside the cultural norms.

This being so, notions of diversity, which imply universality and equivalence (and fail to take account of the significance of cultural capital in formal education contexts and the power it confers on those who possess it) are not adequate to the task of achieving inclusive practices. A reading of Wayne’s tutorial within the ‘diversity’ discourse might have led me to celebrate, enjoy, or be enlightened by the experience as another way of being or thinking (which it did). It would not have provided a conceptual framework from which I could understand my own practices as different, and hence open to interrogation. As I mentioned earlier, the concept of ‘difference’ enabled me to understand that to a culturally ‘different’ student it was I who was the ‘other’.

An important way in which ‘difference’ differs from ‘diversity’ is that whereas diversity implies equivalence, difference highlights oppositionality. Bacchi, writing about difference in the context
of debates about gender, reminds us that difference implies deviation from a norm (Bacchi, 1990: 259). While embracing the notion of ‘difference’ is a step forward from assuming ‘sameness’, since ‘[t]he ‘sameness’ alternative is insufficiently critical of the status quo’, nevertheless, ‘[t]hink .... how difficult it is in a world where men hold most of the positions of power to conceive of a point of reference other than man’, (Bacchi, 1990: 262; 264). I think this difficulty applies in any unequal social relationship, including those which sometimes exist between teacher and student and between non-indigenous and Indigenous peoples.

A way forward in the ‘third space’.

Bacchi emphasises the need to examine the social institutions which give rise to concepts such as ‘difference’ in the first place, and which continue to ‘convert this “difference” into “disadvantage” ‘ (1990: xvii). A first step on the path to redressing disadvantage, and providing better access to university for under-represented groups (Parliament of Australia, 2000), might then be to accept that culturally-specific pedagogy, with practices derived from culturally-specific ideas such as what is ‘intelligence’ and what kinds of behaviours constitute ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’, is a practice that disadvantages students who experience it as ‘different’. A further step would then be to analyse the structures which convert this particular ‘difference’ into ‘disadvantage’, as I have done in relation to the tutorial.

But if things are to change we need to move beyond analysis. In the tutorial, as student and tutor each drew the other some way into their own cultural space, a middle ground, a ‘third space’, was created. Bhabha writes:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond the narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. (1994: 1 - my emphasis)

For me, the ‘third space’ is a powerful concept. It makes me more comfortable about taking on Connell’s suggestion that ‘you’ make these decisions on behalf of ‘the least advantaged’ in order to achieve a standpoint curriculum. (1994: 308). It also provides a framework for action. I have already argued that a form of cultural exchange is already taking place in the classroom, woven into activities such as knowledge generation and critical reflection. What I would like to see is a more explicit acknowledgment of this, where teachers and students together to explore the possibilities of a ‘third space’ as the location of more culturally inclusive pedagogies. This process would involve exploring our own cultural specificity as teachers, and how this seeps into our practices. To do this, we need to engage all our students (not just culturally ‘different’ students) in the process of uncovering this in us as teachers and also in themselves as students.

Wayne’s decisions about how to conduct his tutorial exemplify a desire to maintain and celebrate his different culture and his different ‘ways of being human’ (Gandhi, 1998, 32). He did this successfully, but in so doing he achieved something else: he provided a way of understanding that ‘normal’ academic practices are also ‘different’ practices. As we talked about what was and was not possible, Wayne’s responses enabled me to reflect on the necessity not only for a fluid and dynamic definition of ‘teaching’, but also for the presence of culturally different students like Wayne who are willing to help me interrogate my own positioning and cultural specificity. Wlodkowski and Ginsberg argue that unless educators

understand our own culturally mediated values and biases, we may be misguided in believing that we are encouraging divergent points of view and providing meaningful opportunities for learning to occur when we are, in fact,
For me, the way forward is to become more critically aware of the cultural practices and histories which I bring to the classroom by exploring with my students some alternative ways of being a teacher. I would like to think this is possible.

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