

BEING CULTURALLY COMPETENT OR CULTURALLY INDULGENT: WHAT IS AN EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR WORKING WITH INDIGENOUS LEARNERS?

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Abstract

This article presents a discussion of ideas about whiteness behaviours that are present in curriculum delivery. While culturally appropriate curriculum purports to address both content and delivery considerations relevant to Indigenous learners, there are planes of engagement that encapsulate white subjectivities which are both visible and invisible, and represent just one chronology of whiteness. That is, consciously and unconsciously patterned behaviours of delivering curriculum, no matter what the discipline area, have the potential to produce accessibility and achievement, but do they also reproduce inequalities? One view put forward as part of this discussion is that whiteness is the erasure of inequality because it presents as the norm in many adult education teaching situations; quite often manifested as indulgent practice, but one that also reinforces the hegemony of normativity.

Current research directions about effective pedagogies that relate to Indigenous learners now espouse the term "culturally competent". Like "culturally appropriate", the inclusive element behind the concept "culturally competent" practice is designed to address the divide between acceptance that Indigenous learners already have knowledge of how they want to learn, and the exclusion of these same learners for not knowing how they "ought to learn". Tensions arise around

what is knowledge, who has it, and what can be done with it. An interesting comparison can be made to the way that practitioners embrace non-English speaking background (NESB) or culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students by reinforcing identity development and demonstrating knowledge through sharing aspects of culture such as food, dress and habits, with the way that Indigenous learners are included, or not, in curriculum studies. The indulgent practice shown to the first group could also be seen to be culturally competent because of the implicit and explicit respect shown for identifying and celebrating cultural difference. Given the whiteness behaviours within such practice, however, which pedagogical framework is most effective for Indigenous learners?

Introduction

In regards to effective pedagogies, Paulo Freire (1972: 66) suggests that "authentic education" should not ignore the concrete, existential and real-life present situations of learners who participate in education programmes. As an educational practitioner, I know that these learners come with anxieties, hopes, expectations, and sometimes hopelessness on several different levels, and to deliver curriculum in a "banking style" that provides only a one-way construction of knowledge is to ignore the diversity of students' ability to influence, mediate, and engage with

the world around them. Unwittingly, there are many educators who ignore meaningful dialogue that results in critical reflection, and instead continue to encourage passivity amongst learner recipients to accept the programmes the former have planned and organised, because that appears to be their exclusive right, and not necessarily what learners want or think important to their own lives. Providing access and equity for learners, or seeking to include them in facets of programmes, is the kind of "universal" practice that plays into the hands of the "culturally competent" rhetoric that actually denies the recognition and acceptance of cultural diversity amongst different ethnic groups.

A part of the above rhetoric is embedded within a multiculturalism discourse. Through a discursive theoretical lens, whiteness theory forces this discourse to name its social construction and recognition of the inclusiveness of people from diverse languages and backgrounds. And while also a social construction, "whiteness", on the other hand, is made more complex through layers of recognition of another kind; recognition of acknowledgement. That is, whiteness is about all that is normalised, taken for granted and therefore invisible, privileged and therefore depending on the devaluation of non-whites (Thompson 2001), and therefore natural.

My ideas form a personal/professional collage about whiteness behaviours that impact curriculum delivery that not only seeks to enable "cultural competence", but also facilitate ongoing oppression and powerlessness, for both the recipient and quite often the facilitator as well. Layers of a picture tableau take the discussion from the personal situation to the professional, and then back to the personal, so that three stories evolve

into one; into an epistemic image whereby educational practitioners constantly move through revolving doors to try to bypass the limit-situations of their positions by engaging in limit-acts that transcend boundaries of "nothingness" to possibilities of "being more" (Vieira Pinto, cited in Freire 1972: 71). The task is not overwhelming but at times inculcated with "normalised" behaviours of mediocrity that serve to maintain the "whiteness as goodness" visibility (hooks 1997: 169). This recurring image, however, can be one that represents power, domination, and imposition through benevolence.

To unpack those ideas further, in the abstract this article is referring to "cultural positionings" – about how whiteness is performed by people – whereby whiteness is revealed to be "universal". It is difficult to express the powerlessness I personally still feel when I look back at my own part in perpetrating a voice of silence in relation to the powerlessness of others. In this respect, the problem is not about the colour "white", but, from a whiteness theoretical perspective, that being "white" is about position, power, and control. I am referring to my time as a literacy and language teacher in an access education division at a local technical and further education institute in Australia. I realise now, after years of critical reflection on practice that being an Indigenous teacher with knowledge of my own Maori people's dispossession and that of others, brings no guarantee of exposing the inadequacies of curriculum. Critical race theory (Dudziak 1995; Hayman 1998) provides a potential lens through which to view certain educational practices as coming not just from individual acts of supremacy or prejudice, but as an endemic part of life, deeply ingrained in the education system through historical consciousness and ideological choices about race

(Parker & Lynn 2002), and also about the tendencies of educational institutions to reproduce the dominant role in knowledge promulgation (Nakata 2001: 100).

Whiteness-as-privilege operates at the crossroads of a variety of social encounters that include spaces for a celebration of race, ethnicity and gender; all markers of identity. In prefacing the next part of my personal narrative, I take on board the correlation that Westcott makes regarding whiteness studies: "(1) the relationship between rhetorical form and introspective utterance and (ii) the political implications of enacting the personal as a gesture of atonement or even reconciliation" (2004: 1). To this end, I feel I must first note my own racial situatedness. Looking back on my years as a student of a Maori native school in New Zealand in the 1950s and 1960s, I can reflect on the situation of constantly trying to identify as Indigenous – as Maori-Indigenous – as if I must justify a place within society today; within my profession, my work, with colleagues, and no matter their ethnicity. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000: 87) suggests that "whiteness reduces the Indigenous other to being a function, and a means, of knowing and defining itself through representations". So the journey of definition for me has been never-ending and serves to highlight the reification of whiteness discourse that is perpetuated in "normalising" language even today. When I attended the New Zealand Maori primary school – some fifty years ago – I was constantly trying to justify my "Maori-ness" to my darker-coloured first cousins. "But I'm more than a quarter-caste", I would say, "and if I'm quarter, then I'm Maori". "No you're not!", they would retort back. *If primary school kids at that age could articulate denial and exclusion through doing the crude calculations of race-marker-as-blood-*

fractions, then how easy must it be to reinforce the dominant discourse? There is no doubt that from an early age we are influenced by "social practices that maintain cultural dispositions within groups" (Moran 2004: 1). Martin Nakata (1995: 40-61) realises that Indigenous people are captives of certain discourses, particularly where certain knowledge assumptions make continuous claims about the inadequacies facing Indigenous learners. Unfortunately these assumptions give rise to at best privileged indulgent, or at worst negligent practices of engagement towards Indigenous learners. Privilege is manifested through ideology and performative processes that can identify as "indulgent practice", and these ideas require some further exposition.

The obvious question then, is: *what are whiteness behaviours, and how are they explained as "moments of indulgence"?* These behaviours are embedded within curriculum through particular worldviews that are encapsulated in the values, structures and narratives about whiteness. Certain qualities survive from colonialist and imperialist domination – notably ideas about intelligence, resilience and virtuous activity, and being privileged, self-restrained, and "critically reflective" on the outside – but seem removed from the underlying tensions implicit in practice. These qualities provide different nuances of visibility depending on the socially semiotic context of a particular situation, but the invisible nature of practice is the extent to which these qualities provide an ongoing visible expression of indulgence-as-superiority, or even more bluntly, competence-as-racism. Benevolent behaviours from practitioners can take the form of allowing students to share cultural practices such as food, clothing, and life stories. With some groups of CALD

students, the educational practitioner with a perfect command of the English language and management of the Western-orientated curriculum is powerfully positioned to uphold the dominant discourse of equity, access, participation and human rights. In other ways, these same behaviours exclude the role of white Australia as the source of exclusion of Indigenous voice to protest against uninformed appropriation of symbols, language, rituals, songs and dance of Indigenous learners' communities. To do so – that is, allow too much of a strong Indigenous voice – could result in the “cultural power of Indigeneity” challenging “mainstream society's inherent whiteness” (Gargett 2005).

In further regard to whiteness behaviours, in any class society, only the ruling class can be truly said to have privilege and there is little doubt that even in these contemporary times, we continue to live in a classed society. In the study of identity development, privileged white identity develops from a position of domination whilst culturally diverse individuals, such as those from CALD communities, develop their identity from a position of oppression (Sue 2006: 92; Sue and Sue 2003: 214). Those who rule or govern determine the conditions under which everyone exists, even in educational institutions. Institutionalising such social relations maintain and expand control over wealth, power, and knowledge management. The ruling class structures these relations in such a way that the survival of the exploited classes depends upon their continued participation in *the reproduction of these relationships*, thus guaranteeing the continuation of classed societies. Therefore, through hegemonic processes, it can be said that the dominant class structures social relationships in such a way that the continued reproduction of society will

always privilege the ruling class and its needs, in particular the type of knowledge that it needs or is inclined to promote.

Whiteness can be understood through multiple lenses including domination, race, and privilege, but the white class that dominates does not impose itself upon wholly passive communities. Our *lifeworld* – an environment that involves the familiar, everyday practices around us – is more complex than being just diverse. That is, there is more consideration and understanding required of the layers within relationships, rather than a call for just a flexible pedagogical approach to teaching curriculum. Educators, like other members of society, are continually being colonised through economic and politico-administrative interruptions that lead to what Jürgen Habermas refers to as a sociocultural crisis or legitimation crisis (Gregory 2000: 131; Habermas 1987). In particular, in relation to the way education programmes are delivered, the involvement of governments in mediation and managing our social systems has allowed the prevalence of ever-changing cultural models of engagement, as well as unfamiliar bureaucratization practices, to drive changes in the profession (Gregory 2000). The resulting dilemma is that while governments may have approached concerns about education from a mainly instrumental angle, the legitimation crisis for practitioners continues to include situations that are not just technical matters to be decided on a purely rational basis, but ones that require a measure of “moral-practice consciousness” to produce favourable outcomes for individuals and communities (Gregory 2000). Producing these outcomes requires a hefty dose of leadership as well as management skills and wisdom, but unless an educational practitioner is in an autonomous position

of being able to make decisions about program development and delivery, content and modes of delivery quite often follow the ensuing dominant discourse.

Implicit in the above ideas, therefore, is the ever-increasing "colonisation" of the lifeworld through the rationalisation of systems (Habermas 1987). This idea of colonisation is contained in the regionalisation dimension of time-space routinisation that presents another means to articulate the way that social life is channelled into and out of the site of education program delivery. When "whiteness" is identified as the erasure of inequality (Derrida 2002, 1976) because it presents as the norm, the history of class struggle – and the exploited trying to give order back to their lives – and the social conditions under which they have existed is largely ignored. For example, in examining meanings of whiteness, we need to look at the circumstances of their construction, as well as critique how certain knowledges are presented and taught as though they do not have an epistemological connection to whiteness.

In relation to the subjectivity of the actor in his or her own construct, we often hear that in contemporary societies like ours today, both black and white people think that racism no longer exists. This notion is a form of mythical "erasure", whereby feelings of inadequacy are being constantly reinforced, and where whiteness is a construct or identity that is almost impossible to separate from racial dominance (Frankenberg 1997: 9). Again, from the foundations of critical race theory comes the maxim that "racism is pervasive" (Watson 2005: 4), and that race may be a social construct but it has material effects on real people (McDonald 2003).

Damien Riggs' (2004b) indication that all non-Indigenous people are implicated in practices of oppression and that the task is to develop ways of exploring this complicity leads me to my professional story. I currently teach social work and human services curriculum and have just spent the last semester lecturing in issues of social policy. I spoke about the visibility and absence of "self-determination" for indigenous people in social policy design and implementation, and the history of how self-determination was put into policy-making with the Whitlam government and then deleted through the Howard government's term. For one third-year Indigenous student, the "penny finally dropped" – as an Indigenous patient advocate for one of the rural hospitals she just could not work out how Indigenous people were still being disadvantaged; they were no longer empowered to make decisions for themselves, but under the "benevolence of whiteness", they were given opportunities to "become empowered". *If Indigenous learners can tell the difference between "determination" and "empowerment", then why the persistence by governments, to maintain a position of whiteness indulgence?*

The above idea of language use in Australian social policy shows a model of engagement that mimics the whiteness rhetoric of inclusivity, diversity, and pluralism, answering the vague platitude of trying to achieve "the means to an end rather than the end in itself" (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1998). The Australian Government's response to Indigenous policy is stark and imbued with racism: "Government policy does not acknowledge the applicability to Indigenous people of the right to self-determination. In 1997 the government actively rejected self-determination as

the basis of Indigenous policy" (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2002). Riggs (2004b: 5) suggests a need to not only provide "an explanation of what whiteness is, or what it 'looks like', but rather that we need to focus on how whiteness is practised and to what end". In this ongoing practice of curtailing Indigenous communities' right to self-determination, there are just too many spaces for assimilationist thought, forgetfulness, and/or indulgence.

Rethinking suitable pedagogical frameworks for working with Indigenous learners

At the very outset of rethinking how we construct useful and relevant pedagogical frameworks for any of our learners, adopting a postcolonial perspective helps to name and challenge the legacies of colonialism and their continuation through neo-colonial practices. That is, one person's humanitarian objective could quite well be another's impression of neo-colonialism (Samson 1998). This postcolonial perspective therefore investigates the assumptions underlying discourses of Eurocentrism as well as "whiteness", and explores approaches for constructing alternatives (Hickling-Hudson and Ahlquist 2003: 4). During these explorations, the notion of whiteness-as-invisible is quite often juxtaposed with whiteness-as-hypervisible as "either a preferred or threatened status" (Thompson 2001: 1). That is, when we feel we are losing control of parts of a curriculum, for example how different literacies are marked and delivered, we also feel that our privilege will somehow be undermined. For any practitioner like me, who has worked with CALD and Indigenous students for a number of years, it is very easy to become involved in eschewing the above kinds of

practices and believing that one is doing good work in furthering the progress and well-being of "others".

The narratives of "white good" however, are situated in discourses of benevolence (Riggs 2004a: 4), and as such can also be understood as sites for the operation and management of whiteness because they are "implicitly aimed at managing the agency of those people positioned as the racialised other". Furthermore, behaviours of good are also enacted from a deep sense of moral obligation that when we engage with Indigenous students, for example, we act from a position of thinking we know what is best for them rather than acknowledging that our benign benevolence comes from the "anxiety of whiteness" (Riggs and Augustinos 2004) accompanied by the need to belong, to validate, and to maintain a useful position in Australian society. These good and useful acts appear to be removed from the anti-racist discourse surrounding whiteness privilege because they endeavour to address oppression and disempowerment. But they actually help to shape the hegemony of whiteness just because they are implicated in systems of oppression. That is, this type of hegemony represents "white blindness" (Hickling-Hudson and Ahlquist 2003) to the difference race makes in people's lives and how the phenomenon has a powerful effect on teaching and learning situations within our education institutions. For example, it prevents practitioners from engaging in learning about how practice that comes from a foundation of privilege impacts personal and institutional racism.

Given those whiteness behaviours implicit in benevolent and indulgent practice, which pedagogical framework is most effective for Indigenous learners? Considerations for appropriate

curriculum for Indigenous learners range from needing to place Indigenous standpoints at the centre of Indigenised curriculum (Carey 2008), to recognising Indigenous culture as a positive resource (Durie 2006). There are institutional Indigenous educational strategies that are constructed within a cultural competence pedagogical framework designed to enhance the development of student graduate attributes and to prepare students for active citizenship and engagement in reconciliation and the achievement of social justice for Indigenous Australians (for example see Charles Sturt University 2009). They are strategies that are explicit about the need to “Indigenise curriculum”; to make it more “culturally appropriate” and in doing so, to develop “cultural competence”. In many cases they have also become codified instruments within institutional policy implementation. In the delivery of such considerations, and regardless of whether the focus is a vocational or general academic one, Indigenous researchers and practitioners ask for an awareness of the transformative effects of Indigenous knowledge(s), and the support not only of a “post-colonial” dialogue, but an “anti-colonial” dialogue (Langton 2005) to preserve Indigenous ways of knowing against pressures from other narrow directions. All too often, Indigenous people have been pushed to the margins of education (Hickling-Hudson and Ahlquist 2003) that has continued from an historical legacy of assimilationist and racist acts of oppression to a continued “revolving door-type” engagement. And all too often, they have been forced to make do with pedagogical crumbs that have their genesis in a lack of appropriate recognition of how to employ different teaching strategies (Groome 1994; Groome and Hamilton 1995; Spring 2001). The call from Indigenous educators, who want to make or

maintain a difference, is that research goes hand-in-hand with ways of learning. Durie (2005) posits ideas about Indigenous knowledge:

While it is often valued because of its traditional qualities, the perception of indigenous knowledge and culture as applicable only to the distant past ignores the thrust for development that is part of the indigenous journey. Arising from the creative potential of indigenous knowledge is the prospect that it can be applied to modern times in parallel with other knowledge systems (2005: 304).

Further considerations related to a suitable pedagogical framework for Indigenous learners are those that include the underlying principles of “learning and research at the interface” which relate to mutual respect, shared benefits, human dignity and discovery (Durie 2005: 307). Durie’s ideas continue to inform the binary of Indigenous learning and research at the “interface” by expanding students’ educational experiences and the dimensions of their understanding whilst ensuring cultural safety, as well as capacity building.

Addressing racism and inequity

In regard to whiteness behaviours, there are three recognised dimensions to the reproduction of racialised inequality. Ruth Frankenberg sees these links as the socio-cultural terrain of whiteness constituting a “location of structural advantage”, a particular white standpoint that privileges a white worldview or perspective of self, society and other, and a “set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed” (1993: 1). In order to avert racism and inequity, the question of critiquing practice becomes more not

just of repositioning one's sense of subjectivity to that of the other, but it is, as bell hooks says, "about decolonising one's mind and imagination" (1997: 178). Teaching ought to be a deconstructing process (Derrida 1985; 1976), as well as a recognition process that acknowledges exemplary pedagogical practice with different ethnic groups as well as Indigenous students. Helen McDonald (2003) notes the diversity of Indigenous groups to contribute to determining exemplary pedagogical engagement by providing a stunning variety of backgrounds and experiences, as well as layers of identity from which to plan relevant educational programs that are more meaningful for Indigenous communities. Additionally, the following observations about comparing western worldviews with Aboriginal and Indigenous worldviews provide a new basis for "re-orienting whiteness" behaviours that inform not only professional but personal behaviour as well.

A personal encounter with the work of Cindy Blackstock, a Canadian First Nations social worker, provides further confirmation of how to raise social work students' awareness of different behaviours required for the work that is done with culturally diverse communities. The process starts with culturally appropriate curriculum content that affirms students' lives and cultural experiences, recognises their values, and incorporates their cultural heritage, behaviours and knowledge. In tandem with drawing on knowledge from students' own life experiences, they are also introduced to the notion of *dialogic praxis* (Ife 2008) and intentional engagement to reflect on their views and actions to bring about positive change in communities. This is done to reiterate hooks' idea (1997: 178), that the experience may also be a "decolonising" one whereby biases are

revealed, as well as prejudices and potentially negative racialisation of different groups (McDonald 2003).

In "reorienting whiteness", I make a case to social work students for the reorientation of worldviews, and in so doing, I re-enforce my own epistemological stance. By comparing a western/whiteness worldview to that of an Indigenous worldview, I am actually resituating "whiteness", after orientation to the western/whiteness worldview, and then re-orientation to the Indigenous worldview that is more in keeping with the idea of "cultural perpetuity" (Blackstock 2008). Cindy Blackstock suggests using questions related to comparing worldviews that privilege individualism (the more universal western/whiteness view) or collectivism (the more Aboriginal/Indigenous view) in order to determine the kinds of behaviours and systems that each view generates. She also uses and compares the self-actualisation motivational model made popular and famous by Abraham Maslow – Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs – to a First Nation's model whereby the hierarchy is "turned on its head". Instead of the individual rising through at least five stages of motivation to reach the level of "self-actualisation", the Indigenous worldview shows self-actualisation as the beginning of questioning *who am I, where do I come from, what is my community, who are the elders I can go to for help, what is the knowledge I need to survive?* In striving for "cultural perpetuity" at the top of the Indigenous worldview model, the individual-with-community helps develop "community actualisation" and an expansive concept of time plus multiple dimensions of reality, but most importantly, an identity that whiteness privilege has too often tried to devalue

Conclusion

Indulgent and benevolent practice serves little purpose for meaningful engagement with Indigenous learners. Neither is this practice effective for CALD students, despite the best intentions of wanting to celebrate cultural difference. This latter idea is premised on a universal theme of inclusion and access that is at times included commendably, on several different levels, into the discourse on multiculturalism, but often used unknowingly to promote whiteness behaviours that at best demonstrate indulgent practice, and at worst racialisation of people to maintain their marginalised status. Practitioners cannot practise “unknowingly”, otherwise they perpetuate racist behaviours. They require attention to a more participatory model that recognises the life experiences of individuals, but also the knowledge of individuals-with-communities to effect a more culturally appropriate and effective pedagogical framework in order to deliver real educational equity for Indigenous students.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the support of my colleagues at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Charles Sturt University.

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