

Pedagogy and selective amnesia: investigating the relationship between Whiteness and everyday teaching practices

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Introduction

The professional discourses of adult education make many claims about the extent to which education and training can make a difference where issues of inequality, violence and disadvantage are concerned. Furthermore government policy and academic research worldwide positions programs in education to be both the problem and the promise in securing widespread social and economic change in workplaces and communities. Yet there have always been counter discourses to these professional claims, discourses that point to the contradictions underpinning the soft humanism inherent in '(adult) education for social change'.

My own work, located within these counter discourses, addresses the kind of preparation educators might need to reflect on the ubiquitous, but what I see as problematic, claims of liberation or empowerment commonly aligned with (community) adult education. In this paper I explore relations between pedagogy and understandings of cultural difference with particular emphasis on the way in which White people and representations of Whiteness are ignored as elements of cultural difference in the discourses that construct professional practice in adult education. These discourses are persistent in framing 'the adult' in linear terms with the now familiar narrative of the child who moves through adolescence to emerge as a fully responsible and autonomous adult arriving at the door of the adult education 'classroom'. Furthermore this literature rarely problematises identity; it seems to be unaffected by a longstanding tradition of work in social theory that declares identities are historical, conditional upon context among other things, partial and fluid. Finally I have yet to find much literature within the prevailing contemporary discourses within this field that is explicit about the links between representations of Whiteness and pedagogy. More often than not this relationship is conflated to "mainstream" or "dominant" practice and left as such - implicitly leaving attempts to understand culture or difference to those working in 'target group' areas.

Despite these limitations an alternative - to centre discussions about Whiteness - is risky. Only a social naif would say all White people are the same yet many non-White people experience the effects of Whiteness in homogeneous terms. This, combined with scant attention paid to the effects of Whiteness on pedagogy, suggests to me that it is worthwhile foregrounding the notion of Whiteness as part of a wider project I am undertaking on representations of the subject within professional discourses in adult education.

Generally my work draws on notions of community education currently circulating in Australia, but I believe my points are reflected in the broader literature on (adult) education. Agreed features of the adult community sector have been framed as follows: a learner centred and consumer driven philosophy; **responsiveness** to (local) communities; accessibility and **inclusiveness** with particular reference to specific target groups; diversity of offerings, providers and pathways to work; and flexibility especially in terms of delivery issues such as time, place, methods and entry/exit levels (Kelly Associates 1997, 16-18, emphases added).

Since publication of a second Australian government inquiry (MCEETYA, 1997) into adult and community education (ACE) the sector has been increasingly drawn into a framework of vocational education and training (VET) that is tied to economic productivity. Yet prevailing contemporary discourses persist with overarching claims of empowerment for Others. While some writers acknowledge the links between power and the material and economic conditions of people's lives, much 'professional' advice for practitioners ignores complexity in its attempts to deal with the pragmatics of the 'classroom' - questions about what to do on Monday night. Thus prevailing discourses promoting pragmatic action, but also liberal progressive, critical, radical and feminist discourses, seem to me to be inadequate in explaining how understandings of Whiteness are co-implicated in power-knowledge relations in pedagogy (c/f Gore 1993).

In all honesty I believe that the contemporary social order reflects levels of inequality and violence that are just unacceptable to many educators, yet I know that articulating pedagogies for change, knowing how to achieve them, and actually realising them, are all problematic processes.

To address what I see as one of the barriers to these practices I have found it helpful to ask *Who is the adult in adult education that professional discourses represent as central to the process of pedagogy?* The scope and possibilities of this work are too large to be fully debated here. In this paper I confine my focus to the contradictory and problematic aspects of an education system that frames learners in terms of a relation of difference, yet 'forgets' to mention that this difference is a function of a (White) self/Other relation, never made explicit.

Target groups as technologies of difference

Target groups, a familiar feature of policy discourse in Australian ACE, have usually positioned those in the target as deficit - with 'special needs' (Shore 1997). Alternatively the target groups may be framed as needing help from the mainstream - a process which falls under the ambit of responsiveness to 'their' problems (see Shore forthcoming). A number of points may be made about the deployment of the term target group in relation to the focus of this paper. Policy implicitly represents the providers of services as the norm, while receivers of the service are lacking in one way or another. Receivers have an identity, while providers have none. In terms of common sense understandings of culture the current ACE policy recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and 'people from culturally and linguistically *diverse* backgrounds (my emphasis)' as culturally visible targets. By making these cultural Others visible in this way they become the objects of power and the objects of services, while ignoring that absent-presence of Whiteness (Morrison 1992) that guides their representation.

My intention here is not to create another target group category - the White subject. In fact many people who might identify as 'White' are already included in other target categories - people with low levels of schooling, literacy and financial security - as well as conceivably being included under the heading of 'linguistically diverse backgrounds'. My interest in this paper is in rendering visible the degree to which target groups omit how particular forms of masculinist, financially secure, heterosexual representations of Whiteness, as absent presences, manage the organisation of difference (c/f Butler forthcoming), maintain a commitment to being responsive to the Other, and simultaneously ignore how representations of Whiteness frame the conditions of possibility for policy and pedagogy.

To this extent my project has a different orientation from a project which seeks to decentre Whiteness. I propose that we need to make Whiteness more visible, to amplify concealed discourses in order to track the ways in which they covertly frame pedagogical practice. At the

same time writers who undertake his practice need to be careful not to reinscribe the White subject at the centre of discourse that may not achieve its aim of being oppositional.

That target groups reify identity, is not a new idea. While scholars of colour have contributed much to this literature some White feminist have also been quick to point out the limits of identity politics embedded in the policy construct of 'target groups'. For example Elizabeth Spelman declares

no woman is subject to any form of oppression simply because she is woman; which forms of oppression she is subject to depend on what "kind" of woman she is. ... That she is subject only to sexism tells us a lot about her race and class identity (Spelman, 1988).

But Spelman's insights are not the basis of dominant strands of feminist thought. Moreover I would suggest that these kinds of complex subject positionings are missing in many radical and critical proclamations. Whiteness does not stand alone as a marker of identity but current discourses appear to forget how it might be co-implicated in producing policy and pedagogy. Like Leslie Roman (1993) I want to foreground the fact that 'white is a colour!' and it has its effects in the implicit assumptions made about representations of the subject within professional discourses.

Old and new studies about Whiteness

Critique of White ideology and cultural practices, tied up with processes of colonialism and imperialism, is not a new thing in education or the humanities. What seems to be different about recent studies foregrounding the notion of Whiteness, is an interest in going beyond the broad labels of dominant discourse, mainstream groups, and White male hegemony, to name complex representations of Whiteness that are also 'particularised' (Melanie Coombe, pers comm), and how these representations are complicitous with other power-knowledge relations in pedagogy. This diverse body of research recognises the limits of language such as 'the mainstream' knowing it is of little help to those educators who want to 'make a difference', yet fail to recognise the multiple ways in which (supposedly) invisible privilege (McIntosh, 1988) is embodied in structural and physical processes. The following section of this paper attempts to make explicit the specificity of Whiteness. This involves rendering visible the "social amnesia" (Bhavnani in Bhavnani & Haraway, 1994, 28) that conceals representations of the White subject, as well as the processes by which White people "disremember" (Ang, 1995, 62) the structural advantages bestowed on them.

My analysis is also set within a particular context of discursive practices in adult education that make claims about individual and social change and a 'better life' for adult learners. Within this context the notion of White privilege is possibly less contentious than, say, settings where White people live in conditions of severe poverty and violence. There is nothing privileged about this. My aim in this paper is to foreground the effects emerging in theory in a particular context where writers, who happen to be White, adopt a position of selective amnesia with respect to the effects Whiteness might have on theory building.

The White norm

While there is little contention that Whiteness operates as a social norm in many parts of the world, a feature of recent studies of Whiteness promotes multiplicity and heterogeneity. These characteristics are in line with recent social theory that seeks to recognise the complexity of (even) White subjects. I know for example that my Whiteness shifts across gendered institutional settings and gendered family settings; I describe my Whiteness as more or less powerful in shaping pedagogy, depending on context, yet it is never absent.

Nevertheless many indigenous speakers at the conference, *Unmasking Whiteness*, held in September 1998 in Brisbane, Australia were resolute that their experience of Whiteness is 'monolithic'.

Richard Dyer draws attention to a pervasive quality of Whiteness noting

the absence of reference to Whiteness in the habitual speech and writing of White people in the West. ... [t]he assumption that White people are just people ... is endemic to White culture ... [t]here is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that - they can only speak for their race. (Dyer, 1997, 2)

Two things in fact are happening here. Dyer suggests that not only is Whiteness ubiquitous, it is also non-raced and in adopting this position of a non-race White people and representations of Whiteness frame what counts. The effects of this discourse range from generic use of the term 'we' which in effect means 'White' (Bannerji, 1991) to purportedly innocent questions (or indeed angry abuse) about ones roots. See, for example, Australian work by Len Ang (1996) who draws on the persistent need felt by 'mainstream' people in Australia to categorise Asian citizens as migrants and proceed to 'welcome their smile' (but not necessarily their politics), or to tell them to 'go home'. In a similar vein May Yee's work in Canada draws attention to the need by Anglos to relocate ethnic (Other than Anglo) origins to some distant, foreign place; "the forces of racism that always keep [her] asking questions of identity, belonging, place and voice" (Yee, 1991, 4), yet ignore questions about Anglo origins.

A central feature of both popular and academic practices is a refusal to acknowledge their embeddedness in a dominant discourse that

tries never to speak its own name. Its authority is based on absence. The absence is not just that of the various groups classified as "Other", although members of these groups are routinely denied power. It is also the lack of any overt acknowledgment of the **specificity** of the dominant culture, which is simply assumed to be the all-encompassing norm. This is the basis of its power. (Ferguson, 1990, 11, emphasis added)

This refusal to speak its own name is a distinguishing feature of professional discourses in adult education. Moreover the refusal to name the unmarked category of White occurs in many Other educational and social settings. Ruth Frankenberg's interviewees, in her study exploring the social construction of Whiteness, repeatedly neglected to mark their White friends when talking about social relationships (Frankenberg, 1993, 54-55). In a similar vein much of Dorothy Smith's work is noteworthy for its attention to the intersections of gender and race, yet her lack of explicit attention to the impact of Whiteness on her own career development in the following quote is surprising:

I think I would be by no means alone in seeing my past not so much a career as a series of contingencies, of accidents, so that I seem to have become who I am almost by chance.

The experience of marriage, of immigration closely following marriage, of the arrival of children, of the departure of a husband rather early one morning, of the jobs that became available - all these were moments in which I had in fact little choice and certainly little fore-knowledge. (Smith, 1987, 67)

Smith is referring here to the limited control many women seem to have over their lives and yet gives little attention to the specificity of White "racial formation" in those lives.

These forces that seek to implicitly centre Whiteness were also present in the television program, *Uncensored*, showing an interview between prominent author Toni Morrison and television journalist Jana Wendt. A section of the interview, screened on ABC 2 on 8th July 1998, went like this:

Wendt *You don't think you'll ever change and write books that incorporate white, white lives into them substantially?*

Morrison *I have done. Mmm.*

Wendt *In a substantial way?*

Morrison *You can't understand how powerfully racist that question is can you?*

Cos you would never ask a white author "When are you going to write about black people?"

In this short excerpt from the interview Morrison renders visible the kind of social practices that assume White people are the centre of interest and activity; that in fact Wendt assumes Whiteness is absent simply because white folk are not explicit as characters in Morrison's work. Wendt further entrenches the inadequacy of her responses to the problem in the following comments drawn from an ABC 2 television program *Media Watch* that provided commentary on her overall series of interviews:

Wendt *I think she [Morrison] either, either deliberately, or ... or ... or accidentally, kind of misunderstood what I was getting at. Really my question I supposed was more based on, it was a sort of a literary question (laughter - which could be construed as a nervous laugh).*

Wendt clearly displays here her 'manipulation' of social practices - what can be said, where, and when - as she refuses to contest Morrison's version of her racism on television but manages to disavow her own racism in another forum where she does not have to deal with Morrison's further response. The radio quote suggests it is somehow possible to separate out questions of literary criticism and racism.

In a final example at the site of academic practice Peggy McIntosh's (1988) oft cited paper elaborates on the different forms white privilege might take. After an analysis of some 40 privileges she has noted in her own life she eventually rejects the word 'privilege' as being woefully inadequate to describe the unearned resources which many White people accumulate. Yet she fails to fully recognise that her "brutally honest" list of White privileges comes from a comparison of the White self and the *lack* or deficits she implicitly reinscribes on the Other (see Hurtado & Stewart, 1997, 305 for a discussion of this point).

In drawing attention to these authors I am not wanting to suggest their work is not useful. On the contrary each has helped me to "think through" (Frankenberg, 1993) issues associated with the (White) self/Other binary in very important ways. Rather I contend that these slippages are signs that the White subject is inscribed in many liberal progressive writings, media discourse, and work that attempts to make a difference to levels of social inequality. Some theorists are unaware of writing from a position that takes as its norm the White self. This work operates from a norm that makes it impossible to identify 'specificity' and 'particularity' (Melanie Coombe, pers comm) in the workings of Whiteness.

Some theorists assume the Other needs to be present if power relations and/or racial formation are to be examined. This group refuses to acknowledge that "racial formation" can equally apply to the experiences of White people.

A further complexity in this scenario is that for many white people (and indeed some Others) the only representations of Whiteness they can conjure up are those associated with White superiority and White supremacy. Hence as Dyer points out

[t]he combination of extreme whiteness with plain, unwhite whiteness [i.e. people of color] means that white people can both lay claim to the spirit that aspires to the heights of humanity and yet supposedly speak and act disinterestedly as humanity's most average and unremarkable representatives. (Dyer, 1997, 223)

In this way extreme understandings and representations of Whiteness are crucial to establishing the parameters of ordinary, **responsive**, Whiteness (Dyer, 1997), which I contend are the parameters within which many White adult educators would claim to operate.

In terms of representations of Whiteness within professional discourses in adult education, my work aims to show how White supremacist frameworks are not the only frameworks available to illuminate the workings of racial formation and privilege. I have found Richard Dyer's work enables me to undertake a different kind of analysis of cultural difference and its effects on pedagogy in adult education. Yet there are still enormous challenges for practice.

Implications for "thinking through" race

Ruth Frankenberg is often cited as a key writer in early work on new studies about Whiteness. She identifies three aspects of "thinking through race" that enable White women to understanding the effects of what Omi and Winant (1994) call (White) "racial formation". "First and most literally, [thinking through race] suggests a conscious process", second it occurs within an always-already formed field of understandings of race, and third it accepts that all bodies are "racially positioned in society" (Frankenberg 1993, 142).

I think it is time *academics and researchers* in adult education started to make the effort to "think through" the effects of writing that conceals the powerful effects of a White norm to White people - bearing in mind that this norm is *very* visible to many non-White people. This would seem an urgent step to take in view of the repeated claims the literature makes for the potential of education to initiate social change. It is also an urgent step to take in recognising that theory forms its own pedagogy - that is a body of literature disciplines a field of practice in ways that are often unseen.

In practical terms I think the works of Ien Ang, Gayatri Spivak, Trinh Minh ha and Sherene Razack are helpful. These women writing broadly within postcolonial frames recognise the long history of 'race' relations embedded in any contemporary pedagogical moment. Gayatri

Spivak (1990) counsels White women to "unlearn" privilege, yet how can White adult educators unlearn their privilege when the professional discourses they are exposed to conceal it, in fact are complicit in perpetuating racial inequality? Trinh Minh ha (1989, 40) advises a "radical calling into question, in every undertaking, of everything that one tends to take for granted". Under such "ground-clearing" conditions it is difficult for any hegemonic knowledge to take root. Yet this very practice seems to work against the organisational features inherent in many current curriculum offerings: short term courses, offered on a part time basis, with predetermined content, geared towards economic productivity.

In a similar vein len Ang (1995) suggests that moments of "miscommunication", what is often framed as cultural conflict, may provide a better basis for understanding social relations, rather than aspiring to consensual or harmonious interactions. Yet popular discourses of group dynamics provide few mechanisms for working through the kinds of deep racialised and gendered conflicts that emerge when unlearning privilege in adult education.

Sherene Razack elaborates on Trinh's notion of 'ground-clearing activity' explaining that it offers a means of

reflecting on how we hear and how we speak; on the choices we make about which voice to use and when to use it; and most important of all on developing pedagogical practices that enable us to pose these questions and use the various answers to guide those concrete moral choices we are constantly being called upon to make. (Razack, 1998, 54)

Yet different contexts of "unlearning privilege" require different forms of "ground-clearing". More importantly Razack's work does not suggest "ground-clearing activity" can be aligned with icebreaker techniques so commonly referred to in the group dynamics literature as a means of introducing groups or creating a climate where learning aims and visions are shared. Ground clearing is as political and historical as it is functional in creating a space for future commitment.

The orientations these four women offer have differential consequences dependent on contexts as diverse as classrooms with an ongoing, shared, explicit commitment to social change; sporadically convened workshops of strangers committed to "unlearning their privilege"; national conferences designed to "unmask Whiteness"; and friends willing to forgive or work through deep-seated differences in the short term in the interests of working together for long term change.

Such diverse gatherings designed to understand "racial formation" in the broadest sense, involve recognising moments of fear, risk and uncertainty for White people - as well as Others - yet these gatherings must also be explicit about the long histories of power implicated in how this work is done in the flesh *and* not let White people off the hook by ignoring this. In such forums Whiteness may be experienced as monolithic to some. Under such conditions 'trust' may not be enough to ensure that long histories of oppression take second place to the challenge of unlearning privilege. Discourses of guilt, confession and/or denial by some White people - as well as accusation and reification of Whiteness on the part of their Others (Friedman, 1995) - may end up being central features of a process of "thinking through" the effects of Whiteness on pedagogy. On-going commitment to "ground-clearing activity" may have to be built into the curriculum as well as being established as part of the personal and professional relations established in communities and workplaces.

Spivak, Razack, Trinh and Ang flag the unpredictability of what it looks like to unravel the effects of White privilege especially when it is cross-cut by experiences of financial (in)

security, hetero-sexism, mobility and gender. This is not something to be undertaken carelessly, nor is it something that can be planned in infinite detail.

The claims I make, to critically interrogate the notion of Whiteness and foreground the contingent and the unpredictable nature of responses in working across "difference", go against the foundations of many professional discourses in adult education - foundations that resonate with the 'knowable' domains of Western science. Methodology in adult education promotes the idea of process and while it is fair to say that some processes actively encourage contradiction, uncertainty and incommensurability, it is rare for these qualities to be promote as *outcomes* of learning. Not knowing is acceptable as an educational process but not as an educational outcome.

These issues return me to an oft-quoted article by Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989), who notes many dilemmas in this 'work across difference'. With Ellsworth and Razack, I would suggest that the guidelines for engagement for this kind of work are rarely made explicit in classrooms or conferences where personal and professional histories are so unknown and unknowable. These authors make a claim for community to be struggled for, so it seems apt to ask, as they do, what kind of community are "we" involved in building within the various types of adult learning settings I have suggested above?

With Vicki Crowley I agree that

[t]he kinds of tidy categories of class, race and gender that we have relied on as political, theoretical and conceptual responses to inequality have often failed miserably and often with quite dire consequences. The outcomes and consequences of our politics and practice so often reflect the very kinds of oppressions, deprivations and pains that we believed ourselves to be challenging. (Crowley 1997, 4)

At first glance Crowley's words may appear to contradict my claim that debates about difference need to centre on explicit discussions about Whiteness. My concern though is that this debate rarely takes place in any sustained way that moves beyond commonsense assumptions about 'facilitating adult learning'. It is my contention that a White 'we' is always-already inscribed at the heart of many pedagogical choices. The effects of this 'we' need to be explored more fully and I do not think this can happen unless researchers and academics in adult education become more responsible for asking *Who is the adult represented in the professional discourses of adult education?*

Acknowledgments

Thanks are due to Melanie Coombe for her critical feedback on this paper and her ongoing willingness to think through the problems and possibilities of Whiteness and pedagogy.

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