Pedagogy by the Oppressed: The Limits of Classroom Dialogue

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Good cross-cultural teaching is as necessary as it is impossible. We are not short of advice on the subject, though. The existing pedagogical literature, both 'multicultural' and critical, insists that the key to good multiethnic teaching is 'dialogue'. It is argued that the best teaching and learning occurs when 'multiple voices join for mutually empowering conversation' (see for example, McLaren 1995, Aronowitz and Giroux 1991, Shor and Freire 1987).

I am most interested in what happens when the 'other' refuses to join in, and when 'togetherness' and dialogue-across-difference do not have the same compellingly positive meaning for different ethnic groups.

To set a scene for discussing such troubles in the practice of progressive pedagogy, I start with a controversial pedagogical strategy with which I have been involved for the past couple of years at the University of Auckland.

I run a three year course in feminist theory in education with my colleague, Maori academic Kuni Jenkins. After several years teaching together, we decided that in the interests of participatory and critical pedagogy, and in response to student feedback, the ninety students (all women) would be divided on the basis of ethnicity for most of the classes. In this course, there were two roughly equal-sized groups: one for Maori and Pacific Islands students, and one for the others, mostly Pakeha students. The arrangement was announced to the students on the first day, with the explanation that the teachers believed this division worked best for effective teaching and learning. The modularised course curriculum was to be identical for all students, with teachers moving between the groups.
At the end of the twelve-week course, which included curriculum sections on ethnicity and gender, the students were required to submit a Journal in which they traced their resulting ‘intellectual journey’. They were not heavily directed in this task. The Journals showed clearly that most of the Pakeha students were hostile towards the course division, and the Maori and Pacific Islands students were uniformly very pleased with it. This was evident too in the course results which showed that the Maori and Pacific students’ achievement was on a par with their Pakeha peers. In previous years the course results had not been so equitable.

Here are some representative 'data sound-bites' from the students' Journals:

‘Pakeha’ students speak:

I would have thought it would be interesting for all the students to be able to share their unique cultural perspectives with each other. I know I would have found that valuable. I am sometimes quite ignorant and intolerant of other viewpoints, so a wider input would have been educational.

It does not seem right. Could we not learn from each other? Wouldn’t it be valuable to share our differences in experience?…It is different reading about it in books, or having it taught by teachers. It is better to hear it straight from the women who are having the experience. It is easier to relate to.

I …began to feel that the divisions between females that already existed due to issues such as race/ethnicity and class were being extended intentionally, even at university level.

When will I ever get to learn how Maori and Pacific Islanders perceive the world (since we are supposed to be so different) when we are continually separated?

Maori and Pacific Islands students speak:

I cannot begin to describe just how much more I enjoyed coming to classes…I felt our lectures were less formal, encouraging more student-lecturer interaction and inevitably more focussed discussion. I also found this to be a less intimidating environment and I felt I was able to learn more as I felt at ease to ask questions…

What was even more pleasing for me was the fact that we were going to be split up for classes. I actually don’t know why but I always feel a lot more confident when I am amongst other Pacific Islanders…

I felt as though I had moved towards the centre and stepped into the centre where white people normally reside. It felt good.

The different streams also allow Maori and Pacific Island women to identify the issues of feminism amongst their own, as too often the discussions are taken over by …Pakeha women.

For the Maori and Pacific students it appeared that segregation from their Pakeha peers was effective, if not necessary, for a powerful and positive educational experience. For the Pakeha students separation seemed to have almost the opposite effect.
Rather than seeking an impossible resolution of this apparent clash of interests, I want to ask how we might understand 'dominant group' students' desire for the other. The Pakeha students' sense of anger and disappointment at the divided classroom raises several questions about the politics and possibilities for dialogue and 'voice' in critical and cross-cultural pedagogy.

**Working across difference**

In response to the strategies of liberal education which, in the name of equality, purported to treat all people 'the same' but only served to render the subordinate groups invisible, radical educators have foregrounded difference (for example, McLaren, 1995; Kanpol, 1992; Giroux, 1988; Shor and Freire, 1987). They invoke a positive and critical expression of difference in practice - the production of an 'inclusive' fresh-air democratic environment where diverse cultures and experiences can be expressed and where social inequalities are bought to attention. It is believed that dialogue, mutual respect and shared experiences can lead (albeit with difficulty and hard work) to breaking down the 'the culture of silence' of the marginalised which is normally reproduced in traditional educational settings. This will allow us to work across boundaries of difference, and leads to "affirming and celebrating the interplay of different voices and experiences". Worthwhile education and emancipatory politics are "created out of empathy for others by means of a passionate connection through difference" (McLaren, 1995, p. 40, p. 106, see also Giroux 1992).

Spatial metaphors abound in this literature. For marginalised groups to be 'included', to be rightfully relocated on the hallowed ground of power, so to speak, means they – the others – must be 'bought in' to the centre. This entails "...redrawing the map of modernism so as to effect a shift of power from the privileged...to those groups struggling..." and "establishing new boundaries with respect to knowledge most often associated with the margins" (ibid, p 115, 120).

The vehicle for this movement over the terrain of power, out from the margins and in to the centres – or the mechanism for shifting the boundary pegs - is (the subordinate other's) 'voice'. Voice is at the heart of strategies of dialogic pedagogy. Via her 'voice', the subaltern is given the opportunity to participate fully and equally (Shor and Freire, 1987, p.13, also Freire 1972).

**Hearing voices**

Now, what is not usually clear is that the thing most significant to the other's movement across the rocky landscapes and borders of difference and into the centres of power, is not the telling, but the **hearing** of stories. Most important in educational dialogue is not the speaking voice, but the voice **heard**.

In other words, read closely, the call for dialogue or border crossing is not a call for voices to speak, but is really a call for the members of powerful groups to listen to the usually excluded and suppressed voice and its realms of meaning. After all, listening or crossing-over is hardly required the other way around; members of marginalised/ colonised groups do not need to encounter the voice of the powerful – they are immersed in it and 'hear' it daily.

So it turns out that the **real exclusion** here is not that of the subordinate at all. It is the dominant group's exclusion from – their inability to hear - the voice of the marginalised. This 'silence in the ears of the powerful' is **misrecognised** as the silence of the subordinate, and it reproduces their exclusion.
The desire which gives energy to the critical pedagogical imperative for making room for multiple voices, then, rests largely with the powerful, who want to ‘hear’ the different voices and thus develop “border identities” (McLaren, 1995, p. 106). Dialogue and recognition of difference turns out to be access for dominant groups to the thoughts, cultures, lives of others. To extend the metaphor: in attempting, in the name of justice, to move the boundary pegs of power into the terrain of the margin-dwellers, the powerful require them to ‘open up their territory’. Sounds vaguely familiar.

Homi Bhabha (using Derrida's phrase) talks of the coloniser’s demand for narrative, “the narcissistic, colonialist demand it should be addressed directly, that the Other should authorise the self, recognise its priority, fulfil its outlines…” (1994, p. 98). The confession of the other involves answering the coloniser’s benign, maybe even apologetic, request: “Tell us exactly what happened”, or even “How can we help you?”. This demand, according to Bhabha, is a significant "strategy of surveillance and exploitation" (ibid., p. 99), and re-enforces the authority of the coloniser.

Dialogic education, however, takes a contrary view. It assumes that the opportunity for subordinate groups to express themselves in the critical classroom is an opportunity for ‘empowerment’. My argument echoes Bhabha’s. It is clear that ‘power’ in fact remains concentrated at the usual places on the network — that is, with the powerful, as they/ we attempt to grant subjugated knowledges a hearing. As one Pakeha student put it: ‘Nothing can be changed unless ‘we’ know and are aware of what needs to be changed’ (her inverted commas perhaps mark her vague recognition of this issue).

**Romance and threat**

A particular romance underlies Pakeha desire for the dialogic classroom. That romance is the ‘coloniser’s’ infatuation with access to, or unity with, the other, expressed in the annoyed words of the Pakeha students who felt cheated of such ‘coming together’. In the feminist classroom, this romance is closely interwoven with that of sisterhood. Despite a rigorous critique of women’s solidarity which has become a central feature of contemporary feminisms, many of the Pakeha women in the feminist theory course sought unity and mutual rapport with their classmates on the basis of gender. As one of the Pakeha students wrote angrily in response to the segregated class, expressing the view of several others: ‘divisions between females’ were being ‘extended intentionally even at university’. Anxiety and anger are unleashed when romance is thwarted. Sincere and benevolent desires for a ‘unified’ and ‘egalitarian’ classroom turn any apparently contrary practices into a threat.

The threat has particular emotional force for those who feel it, I think, because it is a threat to the dominant group at the very point of their power in education — their ability to know. A sense of exclusion and outrage marks the refusal of the already-privileged to accept that some knowledges and relationships might not be available to them/us.

Being used to having a sense of ‘what there is to know’ the Pakeha students were disenfranchised, and accurately sensed a powerful loss. In an interesting act of reversal, many of the Pakeha students inverted the old dualism Pakeha/Maori, seeing themselves as on the ‘outside’. Pakeha students talked about being ‘excluded’ ‘a left-over’ and ‘other’. They felt ‘left out’ of something. One Maori student made the perceptive remark: ‘As Maori knowledge was being affirmed as being important…suddenly there was a reversal as to what counts as knowledge and who was having it’. Certainly ‘Maori knowledge’ and language or ‘being Maori (or Samoan, Tongan)’ was no longer made invisible — or considered a disadvantage. This unexpected bringing to the surface of something which was
largely hidden for the dominant group (ie ‘ethnicity’, and Maori knowledge and language as useful) was shocking for many Pakeha.

Learning as absolution

In the benevolent classroom, the dominant groups’ wish for knowledge and mutual understanding is expressed through the desire: "I want you to teach me!". Many Pakeha students saw their separation from their classmates as a lost opportunity to ‘learn’. These students desired to hear their Maori and Pacific peers speak in order to ‘get to know how Maori women see themselves’. As one student plaintively put it: ‘When will I ever get to learn how Maori and Pacific Islanders perceive the world when we are continually separated’?

Access to the other, to ‘know’ the other - the demand to ‘hear’ the voice of the subaltern - is a demand for a pedagogy by the oppressed.

Importantly, ‘learning’ is not interpreted by the students as either talking with other Pakeha women or the teacher about the issues, or considering oneself as ethnically-marked, or as reading the work of Maori and Pacific writers. It is seen as having direct speaking access to the other – being taught by the visible, speaking, embodied other. As one Pakeha student put it ‘It is different reading about it in books, or having it taught by teachers. It is better to hear it straight from the women who are having the experience. It is easier to relate to’.

This demand for corporeal address is locked into what appears to be a simple desire: ‘I am sometimes quite ignorant and intolerant of other viewpoints, so a wider input [from the Maori and Pacific students] would have been educational.’ Such confessions of ignorance are interesting. They are, of course, meant to signal an openness, a ‘lack of prejudice’, a pure ‘desire to know’ on the part of the ‘coloniser’/dominant. Particularly for women, a confession of ignorance is a form of plea for assistance, which positions the guileless speaker as ‘helpless’, hapless, blameless, in need of sympathy, compassion and understanding, even love. ‘I am not powerful,’ says the confession, ‘not threatening, only ignorant. Care for me!’.

The angry and thwarted ‘desire to know’ expressed in the words of the Pakeha students seems to be the desire to be told ‘it is alright’ by their Maori friends and acquaintances. The compelling couplet Love me! Teach me! underlies their demands for knowledge. The very act of ‘knowing’, of ‘being taught’ becomes, most significantly, not an act of logic or an accumulation of information or even a call to action, but an experience: an experience of redemption. The Pakeha students’ powerful and passive need for cleansing and absolution by the other is signalled by a panicked demand for it when it is not apparently forthcoming.

By confessing our/their ignorance and therefore their desire to know, liberal Pakeha position themselves as ‘good’ students. Yet their cannibal desire to ‘know the other’ through being taught by her is simultaneously a refusal to know. It is a resistance to the possibility that the other cannot or might not want to be ‘known’ or consumed by them, or to teach them. This desire for ignorance sits uneasily alongside the urgent ‘desire to know the other’, and suggests the latter to be an infatuation of limited – and impossible - proportions. Such desire, of course, in Lacanian terms, represents an unfillable gap, and the desire for knowledge of the other is insatiable.

Disappointment

In the midst of all this mess and discomfort, I wonder what is the pleasure in (ethnic) difference for Pakeha in education? Why do we educators repeat the phrase in our theories and writing, at this fashionable moment of respect for, if not celebration of, difference? Apart from a certain voyeurism, is it not so that ‘we’ (the liberal/radical dominant) can be
reassured? Isn't it that at this so-called 'postcolonial' juncture when our cultural dominance seems not so smoothly taken-for-granted, that we want (impossibly) to be re/assured by the other-who-now-speaks that we are part of the scene of redemption; that we are not the unfashionable coloniser/oppressor whose despised description fills our textbooks, and from whom we, as woman, are usually pleasingly distanced?

Through being good, loveable partners in the liberal social economy we seek liberation, through your dialogue with us. Touched by your attention, we are included with you, and therefore cleaned from the taint of colonisation and power.

Faced with the seemingly inevitable entanglement of benevolence, desire and colonisation, liberal and radical Pakeha have little choice but to embrace positively a 'politics of disappointment' along with a productive acceptance of ignorance. The ongoing crisis of representation in western thought has meant that all forms of knowing and understanding of the/each other, and indeed all subjects and objects, are characterised by uncertainty. As a result, some suggest, disappointment – of certainty, clarity, illumination, generality – is both a choice and an inevitability; something to be both resigned and committed to (Stronach and MacLure, 1997, p. 5).
References


