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**Web Based Collaboration: An Opportunity For Developing Critical
Multicultural, Consciousness In The Preservice Educator**

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ABSTRACT

The presentation investigates a range of understandings about collaboration, multicultural education and computer-assisted learning. Each educational construct, with its implied concept of interactivity, enjoys currency in the language of educational innovation and social change as articulating and integrating principles of action. They are however, uncritically advanced as the panacea for complex educational dilemmas, with scant regard for the complexity of possible meanings. Analysis makes visible the relationship between specific meanings of the constructs and their potential as agents of social change. This provides the basis for planning and facilitating particular types of collaborative, on-line interaction that emphasise conditions for innovating thinking about multicultural educational practice.

Interpretations of these constructs, together with their corresponding assumptions of interactivity, are synthesised into a framework for web-based collaboration. The model aims to advance the transformative possibilities of socially reconstructive, multicultural learning in preservice education.

The framework proposes an alternative to the distancing and objectifying orientation of previous educational discourses for diversity, which despite their rhetoric otherwise, still continue to have a static determinism about ideas around issues of culture and education.

Cultural difference has been comfortably celebrated when it can be construed and proselytised as a commodity. That is, as a product or an outcome to be safely consumed and traded by the dominant group. Participants in the recreational, cultural experience of multiculturalism do not necessarily reframe, extend or at least, better understand something of the assumptions which motivate their own worldview as a result of cross cultural encounters. An ethnocentric position can be maintained, albeit from a broader base of understanding of others. The 'benevolent eye' is as cunning as the 'arrogant eye'.

A metaphoric play with travel, journeys and border crossings is often used to characterise multicultural encounters. The direction of travel is usually away from the dominant group which is assumed not to be embedded or shaped by 'culture' in the same way as the 'Other' who provides the focus for the metaphoric journey. Participants in this journey assume the role of cultural consumers or cultural tourists visiting and looking at an 'Other'. The act of spectatorship is largely one of self-indulgence rather than an act of self-confrontation and 'the tourist' returns home possibly having had an interesting experience, but largely unchanged. In this sense, culture for the dominant group is something that 'Others' have and the role it plays in shaping the dominant group's identity and milieu is largely unrecognised. The absence of reciprocity in such cross-cultural encounters limits the opportunity for self-reflection and the potential for change as a result of the journey are largely missed. The rhetoric of influence by the exotic 'Other' is romantic and seductive, but the corresponding changes to practices of individuals and institutions, as the result of such encounters is minimal. Cross cultural encounters should at the least be, as T.S. Elliot wrote, "seen to have the benefit of returning home and knowing oneself, if not for the first time, at least a little better." (cited in Carroll 1996, p.14) Border crossings need to place as much emphasis and analysis on the traveller and the return trip, as they do on the destination, the exotic encounter or the new frontier.

Commodified representations of cultural diversity are limited in developing autonomous individuals who possess understandings that are complex and sufficiently robust to help them negotiate and interpret the realities and complexities of living in a multicultural community. Stakeholders are unable to engage with the more challenging aspects of managing diversity and the opportunity for real, social debate and transformation is missed. The reaction to Pauline Hanson's policies or the more recent responses to asylum seekers, and global events developing from Sept 11, 2001 for example, suggests that multicultural policies, and the resulting practices, have not advanced the level and breadth of debate much further than a politically correct acknowledgment of diversity, which has been domesticated for the purposes and benefit of the dominant, social group (Hage 1998). The ease with which the Government authorities were able to tap into the fears of Australians about refugees in the recent Federal election indicates the shallow framework people have from which to inform and build their critique of national and global issues which focus on issues of diversity.

If we understand one of the purposes of multicultural art education to be transformative (Banks, 1994; Sleeter & Grant, 1994; Grant & Sleeter, 1998; Stuhr et al., 1992), then multicultural experiences should aim to do more than extend a student's understanding of different forms of art and reveal the dominance of certain art forms and art world groups in ascribing value and worth. Such experiences need to move beyond a static body of content to be added into the curriculum and cut into the life worlds of all those involved in art education - both students and teachers. Ghassan Hage (1998) characterises this as being able to distinguish and understand the difference between 'having' diversity and 'being diverse'. The former is defined by objects of others for consumption, the latter requires recognition of 'self' as one of the objects for consideration within a diverse social reality. As teachers we want students to be transformed in a way that enables them to be ethical and socially responsible, capable of actively contributing to a democratic society and considerate of the multiple possibilities for configuring and understanding reality. We want students to apply new knowledge outside the educational institution. As visual arts teachers we want this application to go well beyond being able to relate to work from another culture in a respectful way, when visiting the latest blockbuster exhibition. This claim is equally valid whether student refers to the preservice art educators I teach in the Bachelor of Art Education or the student groups they will in turn encounter in their professional life in community and institutional settings.

Benevolent tolerance as a multicultural paradigm, while not without some value, does not go far enough in developing a reflective community and facilitating social change. It functions largely at the lower levels of conceptions of multicultural education that are shaped by assimilationist and pluralist impulses (Banks 1994; Sleeter & Grant 1994) and it could be suggested is more about dominant group benevolent pleasure and control rather than self confrontation and growth.

Social reconstruction (Banks, 1994; Sleeter & Grant, 1994; Stuhr, 1992) as a preferred model for multicultural education proposes to move beyond the lifestyle concerns of the pluralist frameworks, to a focus on life chances, by enabling students to notice, critique and assume different positions of interest and take social action through their art practice, to rethink and reconstruct their world for more democratic purposes.

An important focus of the Social Reconstructivist agenda is on students becoming critical theorists capable of either analysing power structures that are limiting their potential, or analysing the structures in which they participate, thereby recognising their collusion in restricting the potential of other social groups. (Clark, 1996) This necessarily involves the teacher and in turn their students, in the difficult and potentially confronting task of identifying and describing a consciousness of themselves as a social being. Further to this, to name the ways in which their political opinions, socio-economic class role, gender role and racial self image are inscribed by the dominant group, other than the dominant group and the often partial, unconscious and contradictory relationships between these.

In teaching in a subject within the Bachelor of Art Education, predominantly aimed at preservice teachers, it is evident that while Social Reconstruction is a nice ideal, there are many barriers whether they be structural, developmental and cultural, that currently mitigate against the preservice teacher integrating such an approach into their practice. One of the predominant limitations for students is being able to deconstruct their own social construction and to understand how it informs and intersects their identity and values, which, in turn, are reflected in the way they think about and practice their teaching.

People, who have been marginalised and affected by oppression, may find it easier to unpack or deconstruct the parts of their identity that are focused on, because they have been confronted with those components of their identity in a public way through the process of marginalisation. It must not be assumed however that other components of their identity not revealed in such a public way, will be as easily identified/deconstructed or indeed are less important in describing their social inscription. By contrast, the student whose identity is largely aligned with the values of the dominant group and whose social identity is largely seamless with this group generally finds deconstruction of their own social construction, a particularly difficult task. The experience of their identity is rarely reflected back to them in the same way and remains more opaque, often disguised as 'common sense'.

Without access to this knowledge I contend that a teacher can only hope to approach, something like a socially reconstructivist paradigm in their classroom. Without an active awareness of how their beliefs (the teacher's) and accompanying cultural assumptions impact their practice, much meaning can remain locked in the hidden curriculum, and the contradiction and ambiguity that this creates, will undermine the long term effects of even the best efforts at reconstructive practice.

This dynamic can be observed in situations in art education such as where:

- Students use multiple and politicised positions of inquiry in art criticism/history sessions but the same frameworks are not transferred to inform and shape understandings of their own art making practice.

- Teachers prepare bodies of art content mindful of revealing social context and construction as part of that content, but who then limit the potential of these meanings with contradictory pedagogical processes that surround the learning of this content
- Ethnicity and religion is emphasised as a marker of difference without consideration to other intersecting factors of diverse social identity such as class, age, economics, demographics and gender
- Well intended school multicultural policies merely become a means of preserving the status quo of dominant interests reproducing the benevolent agendas of multicultural paradigms that seek resolution through general frameworks for inclusion and ultimately assimilation

Social reconstruction has been successful in politicising the ideas underpinning and shaping frameworks for thinking about diversity and the social response to it but mainly at the level of discourse and socially activist work which doesn't engage directly with mainstream agendas. Frameworks for contemporary forms of inquiry in art criticism and art history have been extended and reconstructed. The impact of social reconstruction is less evident in art making practice where it seems to only nibble around the edge of orthodox practice with minimal re-examination and reordering of mainstream practices to consider other ways of knowing.

Before a preservice teacher can become a change agent they need to understand something about their own social construction as well as the social construction of the subject material they are working with. I would speculate, that the potential to realise the full and active transformative agenda of the Social Reconstruction has stalled at the point where individuals are asked to understand and take responsibility for their complicity in the larger social dynamic. Without an active awareness of the social and ideological inscription of themselves as an individual, and an understanding of how this intersects their practice, teachers are not well placed to in turn help their own students variously understand this dynamic in their practices. In order for students to experience the transformative process advocated by critical multiculturalists, Kincheloe & Steinberg (p.29) hold that, teachers must have already experienced it themselves. Critical multicultural teachers and other cultural workers must understand where they are located in the web of reality- in relation to the various axes of :race, class and gender power and how this variously intersects the choices they then make in their practice; that this is a dynamic relationship changing over time, rather being an absolute and fixed summary of an individuals social construction. Additionally and perhaps most importantly, there is a moral emptiness to pedagogical practice that exhorts students to understand and change the world without concurrently being open to this as the teacher.

It has been argued by critical theorist Max Horkheimer, that developing a critical consciousness allows us to "get beyond old ossified world views and incorporate our new understandings into a new reflective attitude" (cited in Held p.44). It involves the continuous criticism and reconstruction of what one thinks one knows and reflection on how one comes to know. Drawing on the work of Shor and Freire, Sheri Klein (1992, p.114) outlines four important features in defining critical consciousness. These are:

- Power Awareness-knowing that society and history is constructed by human action
- Critical Literacy-understanding the social context of subject matter and discovering and applying meanings
- Desocialisation-critically examining cultural values and behaviors such as racism
- Self Organisation/Self Education- taking part in and initiating social change projects.

Preservice art teachers and art teachers in schools have been very responsive to the first three features through the practices of art history and art criticism objectified through cultural artefacts and social events. Students generally find it easier to critically conceive of the socially constructed nature of practices when these practices are located elsewhere, whether this be temporally or geographically. This level of subtle awareness does not appear to transfer so easily across into a more political awareness of the individual's own practices particularly in instances where those practices are part of, and shaped by, the dominant group such as a large part of art making practice.

The last feature of critical consciousness as set out by Klein is a key feature in understanding where I move from here with this paper. To be concerned with re-education necessarily brings in an element of reflection. To be reflective is to firstly see the world as socially constructed, not as given, but storied by an author. Second, to be reflective is to unpack the meanings, assumptions implications, and intentions of artefacts found within a symbolic universe. And third, a reflective act includes reflecting on one's own reflection. (Muffoletto p.34). In order to question the commonsense tendency embedded in all of us this last dimension becomes vital to developing a critical consciousness.

By slightly reworking the last term self reorganisation /self re-education it signals a more subjective and interactive dimension where consciousness and activity within a social milieu are united. This is not to be understood merely as the pursuit of a politics of identity, which can be aligned with essentialists, but rather as an opportunity to reflect upon and uncover untapped perspectives where contradictions affecting the educational activity, can reside. This refocusing on the personal is not at the expense of the social and the political, but rather as an interface between these two contexts to achieve various objectives: a sense of the individual teachers's strangeness or otherness, to deconstruct how an often assumed mode of being, historically came into being and to reveal how an individual continues to produce, adapt and reproduce meanings in a context constantly shaped and reshaped by power.

In wrestling with the dilemma about how students could take on a more critical form of multiculturalism, the issue that kept arising, centred on the type of experiences through which preservice teachers could be assisted to know more about their social construction so a consciousness of this, could inform their activity. How could they have the components of their social identity reflected back to them without the attendant negative effects that accompany this same process for the marginalized? What type of dialogue would support the development of a critical consciousness to assist students to understand more about the way their life's experience and their educational experiences as part of that, shape the multicultural ideology that underpins their emerging practice as a teacher?

I speculated that such experiences would need to:

- Challenge ideas but at the same time not be too confronting
- Provide the opportunity for ideas to build over a period of time, and leave traces of the inquiry, to allow for the build up and subtle engagement with the patterns of activities that help reveal these meanings
- Utilise the perspectives of others, different to oneself to facilitate the process of making the sense of self, strange, as the 'other' and open to questioning.
- Allow the student to feel they are directing the process of inquiry
- Allow for a variety of forms of public and more private interactions to be variously used.
- such as student to lecturer, individual student to individual student, student to student group, student and content, anonymous interaction, identified interaction, planned

and spontaneous interaction Happen over a period of time to enable the learner the opportunity to revisit ideas and to adapt them

The potential for using web based contexts for learning, clearly offered possibilities. The perceived value of the web in this instance is not as an information base, but more as a resource for facilitating certain types of opportunities for communication and interaction. In particular the following possibilities are suggested:

- Linking to sites of difference that are outside the learner's comfort zone
- Learners contending with different roles-reconstituted roles
- Providing a mediated learning space to allow for expressing formative views or views not in line with those anticipated as acceptable in a traditional face to face learning context
- Tracking the amount of learner interaction
- Opportunity for the learner to map the threads of interaction as a means of adjusting their ideas
- Interrogating thinking as learners adapt and change their thinking in conjunction with others
- A range of ways material can be engaged with and represented

The opportunity to set up such a learning experience using a web context, has been made easier with the introduction of a courseware system called Web CT recently introduced at my University. This system proposes tools to handle the design, delivery and management of whole courses online. It provides built in email, threaded discussion, chat tools for synchronous discussion and individual student web sites. These opportunities make it useful for a collaborative work environment, while at the same time offering students and lecturers a relative independence with using the resources. Instructors have the opportunity to group selectively or randomly and adjust the rights and privileges associated with it. The system also keeps track of and makes available to instructors a record of the pages accessed by each student.

Importantly it is courseware that is available through the University Web page and does not rely on individual users requiring particular software. This is important in regard to issues of equity and access which are addressed through students being able to access university computer facilities and also because the shared platform of the web makes connection and collaboration with international sites more easily arranged and managed.

The model that I propose draws together three important and variously understood concepts. They are collaboration, on line learning and multicultural education and often, they gain educational legitimation merely because of their prominence in current discourse. Each educational construct, with its implied concept of interactivity, enjoys currency in the language of educational innovation and social change as articulating and integrating principles of action. They are however, uncritically advanced as the panacea for complex educational dilemmas, with scant regard for the complexity of possible meanings. Analysis makes visible the relationship between specific meanings of the constructs and their potential as agents of social change. It is useful to examine these concepts because the form they take and the transformative value they have, cannot be assumed by their mere existence. The model I propose is premised on specific understandings of these educational concepts.

The schema in figure 1 sets out these concepts along a continuum where the conceptions of collaboration, on line learning and multicultural perspectives on the left hand side of the continuum largely preserve the status quo, doing little to support change at either a personal or discipline level. The right hand side of the continuum by contrast, draws from different

epistemological and pedagogical frameworks to support a more ecological position for knowledge production, and providing conditions for transforming the status quo.

The differences between the two ends of the continuum reveal different assumptions about the design of the learning environments. At one end you have the behaviourist/ empiricist model which emphasizes individualised environments where information is presented in clearly sequenced instructions reinforcement by feedback with the goal of finding pre-established 'truth'. Drawing from educational theory emerging from Objectivism, knowledge is seen as existing independently of any human experience. Within this viewpoint culture is understood as fixed and largely immutable. The learner is an empty vessel and the process of learning is about acquiring truth that is out there to be known in a linear, sequenced and measured manner. Human Computer Interaction (HCI) which had great currency in the 80's and early 90's, and which represents the position for one line learning at the left hand side of the continuum, paralleled objectivist epistemology and focused on informational cyberspace where the focus was on using technology to acquire information. Collaboration and interaction were understood as a dynamic between the user and the computer software

The characterisation of the other two constructs on the left hand side of the continuums are similarly mediated and limited by a focus on truth, rationality and efficiency. Frameworks for multicultural education are largely characterised through a body of content to be known, reflecting a fixed notion of culture largely defined through the ethnicity of others and experienced through acts of spectatorship. Collaboration is characterised as cooperative group work with consensus, the minimisation of ambiguity and often conformity as the goal. Knowledge is unproblematic and the collaborative community is internal and not located in the social forces that structure knowledge.

By contrast at the other end of the continuum is a more situated cognitive model which draws from constructivist epistemology, emphasizing interactivity as a means of building understanding. Constructivist pedagogy stresses the need for open-ended, exploratory and authentic learning environments in which learners can develop personally meaningful and transferable knowledge and understanding. In characterising the importance of authenticity in this statement Harper et al. (2000) discuss three seminal concepts which originate from the notion of authenticity and which characterise the type of involvement that I would anticipate through the proposed web collaboration:

" For learners to feel that an environment offers credible opportunities for learning they need to be able to explore the behaviour of systems, environments or artefacts. The environment should provide the learner with intrinsic feedback which represents the effects of the learner's action on the system, environment or artefact. Learners should be able to express personal ideas, opinions, with the environment providing a mechanism for the articulation of these ideas. In addition, learners should be able to experiment with ideas and try out different solutions to problems. In this sense they should be able to adopt multiple perspectives by engaging in activities which support multiple knowledge representations, to experience varied cases and contexts, and to have varied purposes for knowledge"

Constructivist epistemology recognises the significance of individual's prior knowledge in the construction of new knowledge, and contends that learners are not blank slates but make sense of experiences through their existing conceptual framework. Westera characterises it as thus:

"According to constructivism, learners are nor passive absorbers of external inputs, but actively construct (meaningful) knowledge from individual

experiences. Constructivism closely addresses the indicated, fundamental changes of the student's roles and responsibilities. It focuses on the learner's control of learning processes; it narrows the gap between the artificial world at schools and real life society; it values the occurrence of multiple perspectives; and it supports collaborative work to synthesize shared knowledge." (1999, p.19)

The central tenets about culture as it is positioned and referenced by multicultural education on the right side of the continuum reflect these ideas. Culture is dynamic and is constantly adapting. Culture surrounds and affects everybody and is not something just to be considered in regard to groups different to us. Culture shapes us, as we shape culture. Culture is redefined and reshaped through negotiation, influence and struggle. Examinations of culture should reveal this understanding and the resulting differential life chances, to be able to move beyond a focus on lifestyles. Ethnicity is just one of a range of factors that are culturally ascribed and which contribute to our social inscription.

The conceptions of the educational constructs found to the right of the continuum depend on greater interactivity and a self-reflexivity within a participatory environment. Collaboration here moves beyond cooperative group work with its focus on consensus to embrace difference as a means to nurture critique, to challenge and extend both students and teacher's worldviews. The goal here to use difference as a means of reflexively articulating subject positions, exploring the potential of 'third spaces'. Collaboration can play a significant part in the processes of transformation precisely because it disrupts the conventional unities of institution and subjectivity (Rowley, 1996). Prevailing conditions of production are challenged; elements of risk are courted as a catalyst for generating new material, and meanings are provisional. An alternative definition of self hood is forged in relationships rather than in isolation. Not only will collaboration with other human beings create zones of proximal development (Vygotsky 1972) for individuals enabling them to go beyond their current capacity by grasping and constructing new mediating tools and signs, but collaboration processes can act as a mirror for reflection as it brings into focus our practices, values and beliefs through alignment and discussion with others.

Collaboration in online learning moves on from a conception where the collaboration is characterised as the process between the learner and the software/technology to a situation where human interaction through the technology is central to the learning enterprise. Kolko (2000) uses the concept Human Computer Human Interaction (HCHI) to characterise what she sees as a more interactive notion of human-computer-human-interaction that considers the social and mediated nature of the activity, moving away from a mathemagenic characterisation of the learning activity to something more generative and socially constructed, paralleling a constructivist orientation.

"HCHI is a concept that foregrounds the networked components of technology. HCHI is also an idea that forces us to consider the presence of others within these networked technologies and in doing so locates this in the constructivist basket. (p.220)

Students have the opportunity to monitor and build on the interpretations of others through the development of web pages and the active posting of material on it for comment and response, involvement in chat rooms, using the web for real time delivery of events in other sites, even role playing MUDs with their emphasis on fantasy offer up the possibility for identity play.

The capacity of the web to support digitised material increases the possibility of a greater range of material that might be considered as the basis for discussion, analysis and response and the social means for interacting with it. The digital capacity also serves to

provide a physical and critical distance from the material to assist in reflection upon the included artefacts Salomon (1998, p.7) discusses this point:

"Students can compose on the screen explicit knowledge networks of the kind they ought to implicitly construct in their own minds. In other words, such an activity affords the opportunity to construct knowledge networks, interact with them as if they are veridical objects of knowledge", and examine one's own cognitive map if from afar."

The opportunity to collect and critically interact with artefacts over a period of time with the history of this interaction as recorded evidence is central to the learning opportunities embedded within such an educational strategy. Students can adopt an ethnographic role. The different forms that the artefacts can take in a web based environment, not only allow for a variety of different learners, and learning styles, but also help to build a richer and potentially more current composite of material for interacting with and reflecting on. Additionally the digital capacity supports networking opportunities and possibilities for others to input and assist in the development of ideas to enhance and challenge individual reflection and growth. The linking with sites of difference also becomes a more manageable possibility.

Students variously try ideas out on different levels and through differing subject positions. Such an approach is premised on an understanding that consciousness and meaning are always formed in joint, collective activity. To act with meaning one must rely on people and cultural/historical artefacts because knowledge is socially constructed based on intentionality, history, culture and tool mediation. "Meaning jointly emerges from social interaction and partnerships with intelligent technology rather than something that is 'just there'." (Salomon, 1998, p.6) This view is premised on ideas of distributed cognitions where knowledge is characterised as something that is "in between" individuals, rather than "inside" the individual. Not only will collaboration with other human beings create zones of proximal development (Vygotsky 1972) for individuals enabling them to go beyond their current capacity by grasping and constructing new mediating tools and signs but collaboration processes can act as a mirror for reflection as it brings into focus our practices, values and beliefs through alignment, contrast and interaction with others.

This throws into the spotlight, the relationships between knowledge acquisition, utilisation and understanding. "For knowledge to be acquired it needs to be actively utilised, lest it will not be constructed but just swallowed as -is and become inert". (Salomon, 1998; p.5) It is easier in the short term for preservice teachers to adopt an objectifying discourse for considering how multicultural perspectives can be incorporated into their practice that is additional content and teaching strategies to be learnt and in turn transmitted to their students. This however, doesn't really engage their subjectivity as part of this understanding, and can easily lead to a distancing discourse. If we take understanding to be related to the network of connections within which the individual constructively places items to be understood (Salomon, 1998), then the denser the network, and the better organised, the more socially located, the richer the understanding.

Locating knowledge within such networks gives an individual fluency in adapting and transferring understandings. Understanding when considered through a constructivist position can be exemplified as the ability to function flexibly with what one has learned, to improvise, translate, innovate; in short, to go beyond the information given. (Perkins, 1993 cited in Salomon, 1998p.5) and to be alert to the cultural sources of our reactions, sympathies and self-deceptions.

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Figure 1

COLLABORATION

ON LINE LEARNING

MULTICULTURAL

EDUCATION

LIFESTYLES