

**How are human relations practiced in language?
English and Indigenous students at university**

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Abstract

There is an alarming gap between what we *want* from students and what we *do* as lecturers in teacher-education courses at university. While we want preservice teachers to develop harmonious, collaborative relations in their classroom, and to recognise the positions of each and every student, they themselves are positioned in relation to their own ego. Students are usually positioned through the discursive techniques practiced at university to take a metaphorical stand in their talking and writing rather than consider how their position might be linked to others. They are learning to argue rather than to negotiate. While we would like students to consider all the positions carefully, we require them at every point to be judgmental and egotistical about a world which is constituted as objective through the scientific discourse of the university. Students are simultaneously expected to make appeals to authority in their writing whilst also acting in that position themselves. They learn a scientific methodology that requires them to describe, compare, categorise, analyse and interpret. But such a methodology produces a competitive, individualist and judgemental approach to human relations. While it makes the ego stronger, it undermines the possibility of Indigenous students negotiating any sense of belonging in the university classroom.

Introduction

Trudy: A lot of the people that came in [to the tutorial] had set views and they would argue it. I remember in one tutorial three students in a class of about fifteen and they would always argue between themselves, it was terrible, it almost went to punches at one stage because they held their views so strongly and they never gave anyone else a chance to say anything. You sat there thinking who was right? That threw me for a long time, I thought why can't I get up and argue like that and that put me right off...I've never had to sit in that situation where I had to defend what I thought. I never really had to argue that strongly in something that I believed in to change someone's mind.

For my PhD, I interviewed a number of Indigenous students who were studying at university about learning and teaching. Throughout these interviews they talked about how they were often shocked by the bad discursive behaviour displayed by students who argued and fought with one another in tutorials (for example, see Trudy above). But it wasn't only the students who talked like this. The students interviewed were also bewildered by how lecturers argued over theoretical differences, differences which sometimes led to bitter disputes conducted under the illusion of professional and objective difference. For these students, knowledge is always situated and so such exchanges could not be seen as anything other than a personal attack on one's adversaries (see Freebody 2003, p. 134).

This contrasts to the way in which knowledge at university continues to be constituted objectively within a regime of truth. We continue to present a concept of knowledge and learning as one that lies there waiting to be found in the books and in what lecturers say and write rather than one that is negotiated and produced, albeit unconsciously through our ways of talking and writing. At university we assume that our ways of talking and writing are somehow divorced from the people we are talking about. The students interviewed were horrified by the suggestion that at university we can criticise arguments and somehow think that this is not going to have some personal impact on the individual responsible for the argument, that dialogue at university somehow remains on an objective plane without having any direct impact on our relationships.

This paper examines some of the discursive techniques at work in teacher-education courses at university, techniques that position students, and particularly Indigenous students in exclusive, competitive, egotistical and metaphorical relationships. The observations and reflections of the students above on learning and teaching at university brought me to critique my own relation, as a lecturer in teacher-education to the discourses of the university, and to think about what I actually *do* in how I talk and teach in the classroom.

Metaphorical relations and the reproduction of the ego at university

Students at university soon learn that one of the major tasks in writing is to establish a position and defend it. In developing an argument for example, they are required to both explain and displace a series of arguments with a view to producing the best position. Through this process the writer displaces one voice with another, but he or she also substitutes one person for another. And through this genre, they are *practicing* a system of metaphorical relations where they substitute their position and their voice for another. They are being trained in a discursive practice which privileges and educates the ego to defend and consolidate itself over and against others, and to exclude or take the place of someone else (see Trudy above).

Drawing on psychoanalytic education, these discursive practices allow the student to perceive him or herself as unified and coherent, and to resist feelings of disunity, uncertainty and fragmentation in their own work, and to reinforce and defend their own sense of identity (Bracher (1999). Particular genres like argument not only shore up the insecurity of the ego, they position students unconsciously in a relation of substitution.

University research, for example often attempts to exclude competing voices when it fails to take into account the position of those who are considered to be competitors. It often attempts to 'stand-on' or take the place of other writers who are perceived to be opponents, or to colonise other discourses by assimilating their categories (Bracher 1999, p. 64). The researcher displaces one voice of authority with the voice of a more powerful one in the literature review.

But students are not only positioned to defend their ego. University, in the main is a training ground for work and society and learning and teaching depend on a student

positioning him or herself in relation to an authority. The students of this research do this by positioning themselves as independent students who can do it on their own.

Oscillating between the ego and an authority

Willy: If I have to start compromising on so many things, I'm not going to get anywhere. It's either one way or not at all, in doing my studies. You can't make too many compromises, eh. [It's] straight-out, straight-forward, go straight ahead and do it.

Willy: It's very important that students can do it on their own. They need to start thinking, well, I've gotta start doing things by myself. Like getting around, each of us need to stand on our own two feet, getting around as much as we possibly can and using those resources, using the library, and use people.

Students in the above research comment on how: 'You make your own standards'. For Karen, university gives you 'the power to break out of the system that has enveloped you so long'. Study at university provides Ellie with the opportunity to gradually climb 'up those stairs'.

At university we expect students to be fairly autonomous and independent in their studies (see Willy above; Crebin 1994). We encourage them to think of appropriate evidence to support their position. We often hear lecturers say: 'I don't care what position you take as long as you can support it'. Students are often required to identify the gaps and flaws in reasoning and logic and to arrive at a position of their own.

However, while lecturers may ask students to consider the different positions, the Indigenous students of this research have learned through their university studies that the best argument wins and this usually belongs to the lecturer, that is to the person who occupies the position of authority.

Trudy: I still don't have a point of view when I write an essay but I will take on the strongest point of view and that's usually the lecturer's. You usually find out their point in the lectures. I know this is not really the done thing but if you want a good mark you will take on the lecturer's point of view.

Trudy: I feel that lecturers have a very strong view. Because I'm never really sure what's right or wrong, the best bet is to take the lecturers' view to please them. In politics mainly, the lecturers have set views and you can tell what sort of upbringing they've had or where they stand. You can always find an argument to back yourself up but that takes lots of research and lots of time and you don't really have it. They got all this information to back up what they think and believe. I suppose that's the way they teach, that their view's right. Even if you try to give both views you're still going to lean to one side or the other.

While students are constituted as agents of their own knowledge and learning, they also position themselves in relation to an authority. They have learned through their studies at university and from their historical experiences in Australia to constitute themselves in relation to authority. Rather than learning as individual agents of their own knowledge and skills, these Indigenous students learn by constituting themselves for an authority and keeping him or her happy (Harrison 2002, McMahan 1999). They are referenced to (white) authority.

Referenced to authority

When we ask students to argue a particular case, we expect that they will support it with evidence. We expect that they will draw on the relevant readings and authorities in the field and in doing so they will position their statements in relation to these authorities. But in requiring students to reference their position to an authority we are also perpetuating a historical power relation where Indigenous people have been situated in an unequal power relation to non-Indigenous authority (Harrison, 2002). We are not only training students in the rules of referencing, we are also constraining and disciplining them through a technology of power which positions them as objects of power and (white) authority at university. Unequal power relations are governed and reproduced at university by a set of discursive practices which often remain hidden to students generally and in particular to Indigenous students who decide to play the game. But there are also other pitfalls that lie waiting for students who engage in scientific writing.

The divided student

Through these discursive techniques, students are divided between two discourses at university, the discourse of enlightenment and progress and the discourse of authority, and they spend considerable time oscillating between the two. At times the ego is strong while on other occasions students feel utterly disempowered and displaced by the discourse of authority (see Willy above). This displacement of the self occurs particularly in scientific writing where the student is expected write and talk *about* things from a distance. The student is split between *I* and an other where he or she is positioned in relation to what others want rather than having to come to terms with what he or she thinks and wants. The student is trained to talk and write *about* others with only hidden references to self in what is said.

Assessment

When I read a student assignment, I am often locked into looking for its absences and imperfections. I begin with a set of pre-established criteria that are designed to tell the student what should be included in the essay and this is then assessed according to what has been included and what has been omitted in the context of the criteria. Assessment can become a hoop-jumping exercise where the student works to keep the lecturer happy, and teaching is positioned as the transmission of commodified knowledge.

Under a system of Competency-based Training (CBT), what is to be learned is identified and preempted by the teacher, the competencies are taught, and the student is then assessed as competent or not competent. Learning is planned, measured and monitored scientifically against prior standards. But like CBT, marking assignments according to a set of pre-established criteria (presumably under the rationalisation that students will then know what the lecturer is looking for) can assess and measure only that learning which is constituted in relation to prior knowledge. It cannot account for any learning which takes place outside that which is already planned, that is, outside transmission-based education. Given that so much of education is currently directed at transmitting more and better knowledge to students, how can we stop them from jumping through the hoops? While they must learn to talk and write in a disciplined manner in order to be professionally

equipped for work, we could also be employing other techniques which do not position students in an unequal relation of power to the lecturer.

What could we be doing?

More of our speaking, writing, learning and teaching could be directed at producing links between ourselves and others rather than attempting to comprehend and assimilate their position into ours in order to consolidate the ego and establish ourselves as an authority. In teacher education, we seem to be imposing more rules and structures to meet the demands for the establishment of explicit and transparent aims and outcomes. As a result, learning, teaching and the relationships between student and lecturer are becoming more regulated and disciplined. For example, lecturer's comments in student essays are often directed at reiterating the rules of writing and grammar; of imposing and reaffirming structure, of looking for the gaps and imperfections in the text, all of which help to reimpose authority.

But we could also try a method of reading and assessing where we actually look for the points of communication rather than relying on assessment that determines whether the student has done all the things asked of him or her. We could be asking: what questions does the student ask? As a lecturer, how can I interact with the student's text outside the position of an authority?

And the student could be asking:

Why can't I understand the reading? or what is stopping me from understanding?

not

What am I expected to understand? nor what does the lecturer want? nor how can I comprehend and assimilate their position into my own? .

We could be less prescriptive in what we want from students in their writing and tutorials rather than submitting to the demands to measure and quantify student learning and teaching. Students could be left to figure out for themselves what they could be including and excluding from their writing and how to read a text. They could be encouraged to ask more questions rather than simply learning from us how to answer them. Students would then be positioned to think about what they want to say and write rather than what the

lecturer thinks and wants. We could then be creating a context at university where Indigenous students see a place for themselves in relation to others, a place which is neither in competition with others nor one which requires them to relinquish what they themselves value. Such a learning environment may also value what they have to say, and how they want to say it to the extent that their voice could be heard along side those of authority. Currently, the multiplicity of voices are subverted in a hierarchy at university which values analysis and interpretation over description and narration (Christie and Rothery 1990; Michaels 1995).

Conclusion

While we would like students to consider all the positions carefully, we usually require them to be judgmental and egotistical about the world in their claims to the fantasy of objectivity. Students are simultaneously expected to make appeals to authority in their writing whilst also acting in that position themselves. They learn a scientific methodology that requires them to describe, compare, categorise, analyse and interpret. But such a methodology produces a competitive, individualist and judgemental approach to others.

While Indigenous people want to learn English (Nakata 2000) it should also be recognised that in learning its discursive practices, they will also be learning how to relate to people in very particular ways at university, ways that train them to substitute themselves for others and to compete and argue as individuals. While it is suggested that Indigenous students need this kind of cultural capital to function effectively, we could also recognise that its discursive practices are directed at training the ego rather than educating students to get on with one another.

We could privilege those ways of speaking and writing at university that are directed at negotiating a link between all the various positions and voices, and not just looking for the gaps and imperfections. We could be looking for ways of bringing the various positions together in our speaking and writing at university, as we do when we ask students to think about how they could include all the students in the classroom so that each and every voice can be heard. We would then be teaching inclusively rather than

training students to think metaphorically and to act exclusively. This after all is one of the primary aims of a socially just education.

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