

## ‘Towards a transformative pedagogy of self/other’

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### **Abstract**

In this paper I consider the pedagogical possibilities of exposing the limits of autonomy and blurring the boundaries between self and others. Against the ever popular tide of liberalism, I am motivated to undermine those pedagogies that reconfirm the primacy of the self through venerating the ‘autonomous individual’ that ‘tolerates’ others. The counter pedagogy that I set out to construct is the product of a three tiered conversation: translating across my reflections on teacher education students’ responses to diversity issues; my current research into young children’s earliest negotiations of identity and belonging; and a selection of Judith Butler’s recent writings on the transformative potential of being ‘beside oneself’ (2004). From interplay between these experiential, ethnographic and philosophical musings, I propose a pedagogical reframing that decentres the self by recasting the lines of connectivity between self and other. Taking its lead from young children’s embodied fantasies of becoming other, this kind of pedagogy endeavours to emphasise the intrinsic sociality of the self and to build upon an ‘ethical enmeshment with others’ (ibid: 25).

At the end of the last century, Nicholas Rose (1999: 43) referred to liberalism as ‘a kind of despotism of the individual’. This characterisation resonates with my experience of working in the increasingly neo-liberalist climate of Australian higher education – encapsulated, for instance, within its individually negotiated academic work load agreements and its students-as-consumers ethos. As in so many other contexts, the notion of the radically free-willed individual now commands unprecedented status within the university. In teacher education the liberalist notion of the *self-determining* individual also drives pedagogy. Independence, individual responsibility and choice - attributes commonly attributed to the autonomous individual - are promoted as key pedagogical principles. Prevailing social justice and diversity discourses within teacher education implicitly reconfirm the primacy of the self through venerating an idealised notion of the ‘autonomous individual’ who ‘tolerates’ others. Student teachers are themselves

positioned as autonomous subjects who must in turn respect the individual needs of *their* students and *tolerate* their diversity. Rarely are the student-teacher's own layers of difference factored into the equation, for this autonomous student-teacher is also a normative unified subject (see Dahlberg and Moss 2005: 22) and diversity located elsewhere. The self and the other are radically separated by the liberalist and neo-liberalist discourses of individualism that permeate the university and the disciplinary field of education.

Resisting this separation, my project is working 'towards a transformative ethics of self/other'. Moving between my pedagogical practice, my empirical research and my theoretical readings I am considering the pedagogical possibilities of exposing the *limits* of autonomy and of blurring the boundaries between self and others.

For some time I have been attempting to blur this boundary in my teaching of diversity and social justice subjects (see Durie and Taylor 1998). For instance, I deliberately teach beyond the limits of a 'tolerance' for diversity (see also Hage 1998), a liberalist discourse that reconstitutes the unequal power relations of 'us' (the tolerating) and 'them' (the tolerated), by locating diversity *within* the university classroom rather than elsewhere. In so doing I insist that 'we' the 'tolerating teachers' are also 'they' the 'tolerated others', and I use this collective experiential base as a springboard into considering the uneven power relations that inhere in the practice of 'othering'. As an alternative to othering difference, I try and foster a curiosity about and openness to the differences within and amongst us. This is a strategy which also leads to a questioning of the limits of

conceiving social justice as a 'fair go' for me and for others. Instead it rehearses the alternative philosophy that justice is about entering into '*relations with others*' (Dahlberg and Moss 2005:146 original italics), it is about engagement with others, or in Levinas' words, the 'ethics of an encounter with the other', not just advocating for parallel and separate freedoms (Levinas cited in Hand 1989:54).

Clearly this strategy is not enough to counter the hegemonic hold of neo-liberalist approaches. A steady core of student resistance to my subjects has alerted me to an increasingly *jaded* attitude towards diversity and social justice issues per se. 'Why do we have to do this subject anyway?' is the kind of question that exemplifies the 'it's all old hat now' kind of reaction. Now this could be solely attributed to my *own* poor pedagogical practice, but this jadedness seems to be accompanied by a corresponding blind faith in the winning trifector of *radical individualism, free choice and tolerance*.

Together this trifector appears to provide this core of resistant students with a universal panacea to troubling equity issues. For instance, it is regularly employed to deflect or minimize white Australian, and white Australian teachers' responsibility for the persistently well below average educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians. This faith in the will of the autonomous individual is expressed through regular tutorial comments such as: 'But *we* shouldn't have to take responsibility for *their* problems. *They* have to learn to take responsibility for their *own* lives. This is a democratic society and they *do* have a choice you know. *We all* have a choice, it's a free country. It's *their* own education and no-one is stopping them from succeeding. *They* just have to work hard like

everyone else. This is a *tolerant* society. No-one cares about a person's race, gender or sexuality any more. If you talk about *cultural difference* you will make an issue out of something that didn't exist. Teachers should treat *everyone* as an individual and not focus on the cultural differences. After all, we are all *individuals*, and we all have individual needs.'

It is comments such as these that motivate me to search beyond my teaching for a counterpoint to the neo-liberalist notion of the radically separate and self-interested individual and to work towards a transformative pedagogy of the self/other that welcomes and engages difference – not just tolerates diversity from a safe distance. My searches have so far drawn upon two very different sources of inspiration. Firstly, I have been inspired by empirical observations from my childhood ethnography into 'Early Belongings', which has been carried out over 2 year period in an early childhood centre. Secondly, I have taken heart from Judith Butler's recent philosophical musings on the 'powers of mourning and violence' (2004a), the 'limits to autonomy' (2004b), and the transformative potential of being 'beside oneself' (ibid).

But first to the kindergarten – and let me clarify that it is *not* a sense of uncorrupted childhood innocence that I am seeking in turning to this site. To the contrary I am only interested in investigating the eccentric subjectivities that I have observed here, ones that cross coherent subject boundaries (see also Taylor 2005; Taylor and Richardson 2005a; Taylor and Richardson 2005b). I am definitely not interested in reinscribing assumptions

of the purity and bare essentialism of young children. Neither am I wishing to construct the space of the kindergarten as intrinsically ‘good’ as opposed to the essentially ‘bad’ neo-liberalist world of tertiary education – although I admit that this binary shadows my writing. Rather, I selectively look to the children’s more fluid, transformative and desire driven boundary crossing identity performances as a key to understanding the relationship between self and other. And I hasten to point out that not all the children’s performances of self and other are open – to the contrary, they can be very rigid, exclusionary and strictly focused upon boundary maintenance. Whatever way they perform themselves, I regard all children as theorists of the self – for in their own ways they are all investigating ways of doing themselves: adjusting their identities as they try on dress-ups in home corner; determining their belongings - their lines of connection or of separation as they negotiate who can play where, with whom and as what.....

Let me illustrate here, by reading you a short vignette drawn from teacher-researcher based observations of a dramatic play incident:

A cluster of children gather around the dress up boxes and pull out the costumes. This is the standard activity for commencing a new identity game. This one evolves around a recurrent flying theme and will combine heroic mid-air combat with jetting off to a party. But nothing is decided yet. The children rearrange the nearby blocks and dress up boxes to construct an airport terminal and as usual, waste no time in getting stuck into their negotiations:

‘I want to be a goodie’ says Ben.

'I'm a goodie' says Naresh.

'Baddies are really sexy' tempts Ben.

But Naresh has abandoned that negotiation. He's just found a grass bra in the dress up box and is struggling to put it on. The bra breaks and those watching him giggle. But Naresh is not put off. He takes command, but not of the military operation ....

'You can only play if you wear a dress' he decrees, grabbing his favourite red and yellow number and deliberately putting it on.

'We're going to a dress-up party and this is a dress-up plane' declares Ben, making a subtly adaptation to the script.

'I'm going to be a cowboy', he adds.

'I'm a princess' says Ken.

'I'm a girl', adds Naresh, patting his skirts.

'I'm a person', says Bill, who is wearing a dress around his neck and teetering around in high heels, attracting some degree of amused attention.

'Look at *my* shoes Sally', demands Naresh, who is also donning high heels.

'You look *gorgeous*' says Sally, as she helps some other boys to wriggle into the dresses. 'Gorgeous' she reaffirms.

Sally then adjusts her own cape and declares 'I'm Batman'

'I'm being a girl-boy' says Ken, trying on a wig, but after checking it out in the mirror he abandons this role to become a pilot.

All the children run into home corner which has now become their aeroplane.

They line up the chairs and sit in their seats for take off.

'You drive' says Naresh to his best friend Ken, but Ken is too busy shooting baddies out of the back window of the plane.

Sally is the air steward and begins to microwave the food.

'Are you the mum?' asks one of the passengers.

'No I'm the dad' she answers.

Ken contradicts her, 'there's no dad, we're all boys, no kids, all grown-ups'

Ben, sensing a dispute, declares Bill to be the boss because he's still wearing the high-heel shoes.

'No, it's because I'm the tallest' smiles Bill.

Naresh, momentarily tempted to join Ken shooting out the back window with a wooden block declares that he is bored with the shooting game and that he is now a 'boy-girl'. Everyone seems to have forgotten about the party. They gradually wander off.

These particular little investigators (as Freud called them) have a very fluid style of doing themselves. It is characterised by a constant decentring of the self and a recasting of the lines of connectivity between self and other. The children are continually changing the script, reinventing their identities and reconfiguring their relations. As Naresh transits from 'goodie' to 'girl' to 'boy-girl'; Ken from 'princess' to 'girl-boy' to 'fighter pilot';

and Sally from 'Batman' to 'air steward' to 'dad', there is a sense that these constant re-doings of self or becoming other, although somewhat self-absorbed are also mutually enabling. There is an intrinsic sociality to their eccentric unfoldings.

Although there *are* recurrent themes, well rehearsed scenarios, favourite roles and props, and repetition *is* a big feature of their play, it somehow still manages to remain radically open for resignification. Despite the familiar elements, *anything* could happen next. And yet there does not seem to be a lot of anxiety around encountering the unknown. There are moments of intervention when a child might try and control the script, but these never last long. Almost every interaction is transformative, and simply creates the opportunity for a new identity or a new line of flight to emerge.

This fragment of child's play gives us a window into a world that exists beyond the bounded certainties of the coherent, autonomous and self-directing individual. It is a glimpse into the world of self/other ethics that Butler (2004b) describes. In this reconceptualisation, the self is always 'beside itself', or as she puts it, 'is invariably in community, impressed upon by others, impressing them as well and in ways that are not always clearly delineable, in forms that are not fully predictable' (pp.20-21). Fantasy is a critical ingredient here. It equips us with the ability to imagine ourselves beyond the known and to remain open to not knowing. Shared fantasy is obviously pivotal to these children's abilities to decentre themselves as well - to imagine themselves and each other otherwise, in fact to desire to become otherwise. Fantasy, as Butler points out, is what

‘reality forecloses’ and as we can see here, it allows these children ‘to establish the possible in excess of the real’ (ibid: 29).

A momentary glimpse into these children’s fantasy play, in turn offers us a point of departure for imagining ourselves in excess of the real, open to otherness, off centre and *interdependent*. Through such an imagining we might be able to reconceive our subjectivity (and here I use Butler’s words again) as ‘... a porous boundary, given over to others, finding oneself in a trajectory of desire in which one is taken out of oneself, and resituated irreversibly in a field of the other in which one is not the presumptive center. Th[is] particularly sociality .... establishes a field of ethical enmeshment with others and a sense of disorientation for the first-person ..... *we are always for something more than, and other than, ourselves*. To articulate this as *entitlement* is not always easy, but perhaps not impossible’ (ibid: 25, my italics).

My challenge is to articulate the *entitlement* of this ethical enmeshment as pedagogy, and to use this pedagogy, grounded in an ethics of self/other, to counter the aggressive individualism of neo-liberalism. The first step is to recognise that we cannot know ourselves completely except through others – we constitute each other and are vulnerable to each other. We are enmeshed rather than separate, responsible for *others* not just for ourselves. This is to insist upon a radical *intersubjectivity*. A further challenge is to convince my students that not only do we need each other and carry a responsibility for each other, but that our learning (about ourselves and each other) is dependent upon our

openness to the *difference* of others. This involves some risk taking of course, it requires us to explore the ways in which we ‘might we encounter the difference that calls our grids of intelligibility into question without trying to foreclose the challenge that the difference delivers’ (ibid: 35). It requires that we stay open to that which we do not understand.

Such a task brings us back to the heart of the pedagogical process. Picking up on Blanchot’s words, Bill Readings (1996:161) defines the very ‘condition of pedagogical practice’, as an ‘infinite attention to the other’. Education, he says, ‘... is this drawing out of the otherness of thought’ (ibid:162). To ‘... think beside each other and beside ourselves, is to explore an open network of obligations that keeps the question of meaning open as a locus of debate’ (ibid:165). This is a process fundamental to *all* learning. We cannot take in new knowledge without temporarily suspending what we already know. We cannot learn without some degree of openness to the unknown.

A pedagogy based upon an ethics of self/other renders apparent this generic learning process and adds to it the understanding of the responsibilities that we carry for each other *because* of our ethical enmeshment. Mindful of our intersubjectivities, this pedagogy proceeds in the construction of new understandings through *deliberately* remaining open to the other. It necessitates a dialogue around our differences, listening to others, welcoming being changed, resisting foreclosing on difference and saying ‘yes’ to the unknown (Dahlberg and Moss 2005:116).

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