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With an Art to Engagement

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Abstract

The concept of teaching non-Indigenous students about issues in Aboriginal education can not be left to a 'how to' and 'what works' regimes. This is a bit like a short cut on the computer screen. It works if it works, but if it doesn't work, no one knows what to do next. This paper argues, therefore, for the necessary steps to be taken by students and instructors to examine the reasons for the disadvantage faced by Indigenous students within the education system and to 'tool up' student teachers to be able to reflect and think through reasons behind negative responses and depleted expectations. Cultural and historical knowledge can inform and arm the student teacher with appropriate strategies based on enlightened decision making and empowered judgements.

Introduction

This paper is part of a reflective journey delivering a new subject in Indigenous studies on a rural campus of a major university. The subject sought to inform student teachers about the major background concerns of Aboriginal society historically and in the contemporary world in issues related to Aboriginal education. It informed a group of students electing to study the subject, though not compulsory to their teaching course, it would be useful to future teachers if it were. Those who studied the subject appreciated its significant value to future practice. This dialogue or channel of communication with student teachers began in the second semester 2006. The class dynamic went beyond the simple how to solutions students first expected to find at the beginning of the course. By the end they had participated in finding their own solutions to prickly questions and had all gone on a path of discovery in terms of who they each are as persons and as teachers. The terms Koorie (Victorian Aboriginal person), Koori (NSW Aboriginal person), Aboriginal and Indigenous are used throughout not to confuse but because they are interchangeable.

There appeared to be several important issues arising during the course of delivering the subject that caused me to contemplate. Part of this was my own concerns as an Indigenous person and what the participation meant to me. Firstly, the question of students looking for short cuts to 'what works', arising in the early weeks were self remedied. By enjoying their own ways of exploring content in practical ways they stopped looking for shortcuts and enjoyed the journey, even if at times it was uncomfortable. Indeed, they came to the last tutorial in a week when students in other subjects were already over it. Secondly, the commitment to telling the true history with out pretence facilitated a spirit of studentship where the group wanted to know more, and understand. Shock turned to anger, anger turned to a reason to want a better

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world and create better learning spaces for Aboriginal children. Thirdly, by allowing an environment of honest contemplation by these eager students a process of empathetic learning had been fostered. The students felt emotionally about what they learned. The lecturer's role was therefore one of nurturing leadership through the 'hard core stuff'. All this seems like idealised renderings, but to see elemental change on this level with non-Indigenous participants does put stars in a teacher's eyes.

Reflecting the Journey

The group loved to role-play, daring to investigate themselves as 'other' and as 'red-neck' to try to understand what makes a 'red-neck' tic, and how might you positively affect those with such world views, even marginally. The students explored their own ideas and feelings through presentations and questioned philosophies through deep insight and problem solving. The focus of the last lecture was the students creating their own brainstorming to indicate to them selves how much they had learned using these kinds of learning tools (and as exam preparation). It gave validity to this form of learning experience. The semester adventure was anchored by a series of formal lectures, which explained core issues and facilitated passing on of the history and key issues of Aboriginal education in a spirit of knowledge sharing and breaking down of barriers, without being waylaid by guilt mongering or negativity. Each student was important and was represented as such by the lecturer's esteem toward her or him.

Trailing back in time and until fairly recently the necessity for non-Indigenous student teachers in education to be acquainted with Aboriginal life-ways was not only unheard of but considered of limited use. More usually student teachers have a week or two on concerns in a diverse classroom, which may include aspects of Indigenous Australia. In a Dip Ed tacked on to the end of a degree, there may be space for a guest spot from an Indigenous person, but realistically the educational training landscape is so crowded that the Indigenous voice becomes unavoidably very limited. Therefore, the new subject under discussion was created to provide a solution to the challenge of a knowledge vacuum. This is about the journey in the course of developing and teaching a new subject in Aboriginal education as an Indigenous educator and based on long realised sentiments reflected by the Aboriginal community and what they want known by teachers who are going to be looking after their kids. "If only they knew," is a common lament.

The new subject was charged with telling the history, telling about the racism and to tell about the challenges in Aboriginal education for the people who can't stand in front of student teachers and say it themselves. Such an advocacy role gave the confidence and credibility to the author to let the teaching process happen. There was a strong sense of purpose in teaching this group of non-Indigenous people. At times in the past, reflection had produced admissions that the chief purpose for the author as an Aboriginal educator was to teach other Aboriginal people and to support Aboriginal learning. However, perhaps teaching white people better ways to teach Aboriginal

people was a multi-layered approach to supporting Aboriginal learning. Convoluted thinking, but the past for the author had been in teaching Aboriginal people, teaching 'the other' was still new.

Working in an Indigenous studies area there seems to be magnetic attractions from every kind of racism, hostility and resentment against personhood that one can imagine. It also however, means one sees the scales come off the eyes of non-Indigenous people. Their perceptions may flower to advocacy and collaboration in developing opportunities for change within the system. Some of the students engaged in studying the unit described will become marvellous teachers, parents themselves and a few: even school principals. Their contribution to changing viewpoints towards Aboriginal studentship and methods to facilitate positive outcomes are embedded in understanding based on empathy and feeling rather than only academic logic.

Something about Feeling

Professor Roslyn Arnold (2004, p.3) has written about this kind of instruction as using 'empathic intelligence'. She figures:

Empathically intelligent educators demonstrate a number of qualities, attributes, predispositions and abilities, in particular those which contribute to enthusiasm, capacity to engage others, expertise and empathy.

She continues, important to the argument at hand and emphasising the importance of following feelings to have a place in the classroom alongside thought, 'empathically intelligent pedagogy can be transformative' (p.3). It is a strong supposition by the author that this is the methodology used most frequently in a classroom run by many Indigenous educators. Certainly part of the understanding of Aboriginal culture that the students gained access to, was by the way subject material was investigated and instruction was given in a nurturing classroom situation. Students were allowed to think for themselves. Students came to conclusions not by derision or cajoling but by consideration and empathy. To continue with the Arnold model, students are given the opportunity for their feelings on a topic and their cognitive opinions to connect in transformative ways (p.3). This style of interaction and learning links the students with being allowed to feel the content of their subject and express their feelings to each other: their cynicism, revelations, critical positioning and thoughts on change. Part of their positioning is a questioning of past and present policy and reform attached to sentiments based on not only intellectual argument but emotions. The topics come alive in terms of enquiry from the mind and sensitivities of the heart. Notions of social justice and human rights issues flavour considerations of equity and fairness within education. Indeed researcher Glenn Auld (2004), who has done significant work in literacy in Indigenous communities considers some non-Indigenous participations ('intervention') in Indigenous education of great support for human rights and justice.

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Aboriginal people when the writer was a 'kid', anyway, were stone-age fossils. Such project content was in the curriculum. There was no representation of the real history. There was no representation of the strength of Aboriginal workers fighting for rights, or Aboriginal people surviving dislocation and dispossession, achieving through the mission system, achieving financial stability through itinerant and seasonal work or accepting lesser opportunities because of the motif of the stone-age Black. This motif still prevails in our academies in the guise of some anthropologies and theories of the noble savage. Considering that a synonym for noble is dignified, one of the things that a system of separation (Beresford 2003, p.41) and exclusion tried to do to our people was take away dignity. This continues with white experts telling us that we are only true to our culture and ancestry if we keep away from Western knowledge that promote an ability to succeed in the capitalist system, have expectations of economic sustainability and be able negotiate positive outcomes within the mix of tourism or hospitality. White mythologies about Aboriginal people are all about keeping the power-base white. Little (2005, p.101-102) describes how misrepresentations of Aboriginal history even into the present time can distort into misguided white mythologies, untrue and in their distortion harmful to our present generation of children.

Breaking down this power base can essentially be best done by providing Aboriginal children with Aboriginal teachers. Teacher training is an essential area for growth of capacity within the community. Very few Koories study at the campus in question, of these the only ones who study education are people who have newly discovered their identity, in other words who have not realised the implications of exclusion. Interestingly, they are the ones most impinged on by cultural genocide because their own links to ancestors have been lost. However, their alliance to positive change is sharp and defined by their own loss. This paper is not discussing the implications of exclusion but our new subject did. The small numbers of Aboriginal students who make it to year eleven and twelve have an implication of reduced numbers entering university, despite mature age intakes. Worse still are the attrition rates once in university. Koorie students have begun as undergraduates with a vision of themselves becoming successful mentors and role models for the younger ones following on. Recently, placement conditions have prevented at least one education student completing his training. The environment in which he was expected to teach suffered from a lack of what he needed as part of his training: empathy, acceptance and understanding. The work of Santoro, Reid, Simpson and McConaghy (2004) in New South Wales highlights the difficulties for Indigenous student teachers being able to continue in their chosen professions as teachers. The Santoro et al research indicates that Indigenous people may begin in teaching and then move on into another profession, such are the pressures encountered (p.1). The same applies, from first hand experience, for Indigenous academics trying to work in mainstream universities: the frustration and alienation is such that many opt for another profession, more useful to the Indigenous community, more fulfilling and on the same pay. Yet the critical component for this statement is that Indigenous academics are critical to any change of philosophy for non-Indigenous students, and the teaching of the unit described was

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valued more highly by the participating students because of the Indigeneity of the lecturer.

For an Indigenous person working within these paradigms the question remains: what comes first the hen or the chicken. In other words can suitably conscience non-Indigenous teachers make a difference to future numbers of Aboriginal student teacher trainees by implementing Aboriginal friendly/ culturally responsive ways of guiding student learning at critical times in children's lives, from prep through to the non-compulsory years of learning. The considered opinion of the author is that they can make a difference. Having affirming school experiences made possible by good teachers affects future expectations for learners. Poor school experience does not foster future expectations of becoming a teacher or the likelihood that school is a great work environment. The Santoro et al (2004, p.5) research indicates that even with reasonably confident expectations by Indigenous teachers actual experiences are counter to Aboriginal ways of seeing (perception) and ways of doing (teaching practice). Another idea often commented upon by Aboriginal people is their dislike of teachers, so it is indeed a tremulous experience having to go to a school to represent ones children when you are the only Aboriginal voice in the room and teachers hold all the power. These are the kinds of scenarios that need to be understood by student teachers by stepping into the shoes of that parent. Not only in terms of experiences but with curriculum issues as well.

The transformation of ideas and expectation that comes from the ability to see the world in a less white/ more Aboriginal way is an important outcome or tool of this new subject and the author's experience in facilitating this process was that students showed both grace and gratitude in their learning. Clearly this is a tool that will be useful for teachers of Aboriginal students, and in a spirit of reconciliation for those teachers teaching white children. The vision of working with curriculum to include Aboriginal perspectives is valuable whether or not there are Aboriginal students in the classroom. Perhaps this was a significant outcome for the cohort of students in this unit. What they learnt most of all was that they are carriers of first-rate change within the system. The curriculum is not a brick wall to them but can be seen for its potential flexibility, elasticity and challenges to apply best practice models. Again, the usefulness of being provided with mechanisms to be able to understand the Aboriginal point of view situates teachers, as well, in a better place when fostering support for peers who happen to be Indigenous. The occurrences of negativity expressed in Santoro et al (p.5), especially with negative reactions from authority figures such as Deputy Principals, need to change within the next generation.

Certainly the unit gave the usual spiel about Aboriginal culture and ways of doing, Aboriginal viewpoints on teaching and learning, but it also carved out a place where the conundrums of the importance of kinship could be easily appreciated. The relevance of significant persons as guides within the extended family life of the child could be transferred to mentoring programmes relating to the broader community. The anticipation of successful mentor programmes is one of the positive outlooks of community interest at the moment. The relevance of cultural ways in formulating

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curriculum strategies were appreciated with practical exercises, one such as making toys from materials gathered from nature (Halling 1999, editor). The tactility of the course remained important. Students participated in poster creation allowing their creative spirits to develop ideas in collaboration and outside the box of the alphabet. All the while students are 'tooling up' for their own classrooms, with an understanding that the curriculum is not always inside a book and can be expressed in better ways than that, sometimes.

Conclusion

The hardest chomp for the students was the past history of Aboriginal education (Fletcher 1989, Kartinyeri 2000, Maushart 1993) mostly because it hurt their sensibilities as well as their sensitivities. It was important for them to find solutions to treat their own frustration and for them to realise they were part of the solution and positive instruments for change. That became an empowering theme for the rest of the course. The students grew from being, in a sense, idol bystanders to wanting to become active participants in making things better. Critical to this repositioning was living the history. An understanding grew of the stories of families who had to move on to get their children an education, families who had children taken from them because they made a stand to get an education for their children at schools where they were not accepted. Or racist policies that snatched children had no place in human rights and social justice. Kindred spirits participated in social change within the context of classroom role-plays and class presentations became important explanations on the relevance of inclusive curriculum. The students moved on, more eloquent in their notions of Aboriginal issues in education and with a sense that feeling for something better for Aboriginal children's futures was not only a fair ask but a part of their striving as teachers.

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