

## **EQUITY, ACADEMIC RIGOUR AND A SENSE OF ENTITLEMENT: VOICES FROM THE ‘CHALKFACE’**

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### **Abstract**

When working with teacher education students one of our aims is to look at ‘race’ and racism, and the implications that ‘being white’ has for teachers’ practice. Hence we develop conversations around who we are as gendered and racialised subjects who occupy specific socio-economic positions. Our students find this disconcerting, however, as educators we find the journey equally challenging, even painful. When students personalize their discomfort by attacking us, it is not easy to simply shrug off hurtful comments. What we want to do in this paper, therefore, is to share the stories of our ‘tragedies and triumphs’ and present a number of impressionistic snapshots that illustrate the effects that teaching about social justice issues has on us as teachers. The issues mentioned in our title form the basis of our narratives: we are firmly committed to retaining our focus on equity as a guiding principle without sacrificing academic rigour, while at the same time addressing student resistance and the sense of entitlement that some bring to the unit.

### **Introduction: Our approaches to teaching about social justice**

As teacher educators we believe that teachers have a responsibility to implement principles of social justice; that it is not enough simply to teach, but that we have a responsibility to teach in ways that are inclusive of all students and address issues of ‘race’ and racism, ethnicity and culture, gender and discrimination, social class and poverty, prejudice and stereotyping, power and powerlessness. These are the central concerns of *Education for Social Justice*, a second-year mandatory teacher education unit. Theoretically, this unit is grounded in critical theorizing that attempts to move “beyond interpretation to change” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 1995, p. 255) and that links the teacher education curriculum to the critical study of power, language, culture, and history. We are, moreover, concerned to invert the gaze and to explore the “profound social consequences that [the] construction [of whiteness] holds for the non-white” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997, p. xiii). While we want white students to own their whiteness and to become aware of white race privilege, at the same time it is important to provide future teachers with strategies and resources that enable them to move beyond the feelings of guilt that critically examining whiteness frequently engenders. Hence, our aims are to develop conversations around who we are as gendered and racialised subjects who occupy specific socio-economic positions and “establish ways of speaking about whiteness, that move[d] our students, and ourselves to a more critical, more empowered understanding of race and whiteness” (Marx and Pennington, 2003, p. 90). Yet, when teaching about race and racism and how we as ‘whites’ are racialized, we are ‘hacking at the very roots’ (Aveling, 2006) of the ways in which students have conceptualized their subject positions. Many of our students, whatever their gender, social class position or ethnic background have told us that they have had to struggle to get to university, that they have experienced hardships, even discrimination and that they are not racist; that their whiteness has definitely not conferred privileges of any kind. They are quite right, of course, and to assert otherwise often leads to defensiveness; something that is not unique to this group of students. It is, rather, a response that other teacher educators, working with similar groups of white teacher education students, have noted, both in Australia (Ryan, 1997; Aveling, 2007; Sonn, 2008) and elsewhere (Levine-Rasky, 2000; Marx & Pennington, 2003; Hytten & Warren, 2003). Thus, students tend to find the unit disconcerting. While student discomfort can manifest in negative ways, on reviewing the responses from the 2010 and 2011 cohorts, many students commented that the unit had been confronting but that they had learned much despite the challenges:

Some of the topics were quite confronting, but still a really enjoyable unit. This unit should be essential for all education students. Great unit!!

This unit changed the way I think. ... I am totally committed to Social Justice as a result ... and I would not have found this commitment unless being exposed to the material in this unit.

I just wanted to say that your unit has been such a good learning experience for me and has challenged me in a way I never have been before.

*As Education for Social Justice* is a large unit we schedule 6-8 workshop sessions per week. As tutors we have worked together for a number of years and meet regularly to discuss problems, to share what has worked and what has not worked, and to reflect on our own social positioning *vis-a-vis* those of our students. As a group we are ethnically diverse and not all of us are 'white'. Nevertheless, all of us 'call Australia home'. We bring our passion as well as our expertise to our teaching and if our students find the unit disconcerting, as educators we find the journey equally painful. When students respond in quite bizarre ways, or personalize their discomfort by attacking us, it is not easy to shrug off hurtful comments. What we want to do in this paper, therefore, is to share the stories of our 'tragedies and triumphs'. The vignettes presented in this paper illustrate the effects that teaching about social justice issues has on us as teachers. The issues mentioned in our title form the basis of our narratives: we are firmly committed to retaining our focus on equity as a guiding principle without, however, sacrificing academic rigour. While we share the conviction that racism is not an 'Aboriginal' problem or a 'black' problem, that it is, rather, a problem that is grounded in the discursive regimes of whiteness, at the same time we are mindful to address student resistance and the sense of entitlement that some bring to the unit.

Inevitably, our individual narratives "place the self within a social [academic] context" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9) and in telling our stories we "ask readers to relive the experience through the writer's ... eyes" (Denzin, 2000, p. 905). Moreover, "developing forms of pedagogy and practice that are reflexive and transformative of oppressive racial power relations require that we engage in decentering ourselves" (Sonn, 2008, p. 164). Hence reflecting on our teaching is central to our endeavors. As a group we know that good intentions are never enough and that we need, not only to ask our students to become reflective about their teaching, but also to continually reflect on our own teaching if we are to prepare teachers who can apply their learning within their professional contexts upon graduation. However, at this point we want to contextualise our narratives/reflections and ground our stories in stories that emanate from the students themselves.

## Students' voices

In reviewing students' comments it is not surprising that some students show evidence of frustration, even anger, because the unit raises more questions than it provides definitive 'answers'. At the same time, students have talked about how 'eye-opening' and 'life-changing' the unit has been. In fact, opinions about issues tend to be diametrically opposed and rife with contradictions. These contradictions relate to many things but in particular point to our in/ability to create a space in which to discuss difficult issues. Thus, in the anonymous evaluations at the end of semester we find responses such as "the workshops enabled different views to be expressed in an open and non-judgemental environment" juxtaposed with "I feel this unit was more about conforming to what they wanted, rather than being able to speak freely or without prejudice — people felt judged and awkward for speaking their mind..." Yet, overall comments are positive: "I have thoroughly enjoyed this unit — it has opened my eyes up to a lot of aspects I was not previously aware of" and "Great unit, I loved it. Very thought provoking and helped me to open my eyes to racism in all forms. Gave some great thinking points for my teaching practice." Other students have, of course, told us in no uncertain terms that we needed to change our ways and voiced their displeasure. Some have argued that the unit is not sufficiently academic, or that it represents 'reverse' racism, or indeed have personalised their dissatisfaction:

This unit does not (in my opinion) deserve to be considered an academic unit of study.

My resentment is that through her selective presentation of information and voices Nado is denying us an opportunity to see the whole story.

All we were being taught was that white people are evil.

The course can come off a little racist towards Europeans and often offends people.

This was a pitiful attempt at doctination! An embarrassingly one-sided unit. It has done more harm than good and is a complete failure and amoral.

While we take heart from positive comments, it is largely the negative comments that have prompted annual evaluations and re-evaluations of our approaches. Yet each year it seems that we need to ‘re-invent the wheel’ as each fresh cohort of students bring their own life experiences and preconceptions to class.

## Teachers’ Voices

As tutors we certainly get our fair share of both positive and negative feedback and while it is wonderful to bask in comments such as “my tutor always challenged my thoughts and that is just what this unit needs and it has added great value to my education”, or roar with laughter and simultaneously weep with joy at comments such as the one that described Nado’s lecturing style as “waffling on a little bit” but concluded that “on reflection it is all relevant to what we are learning. And some things do show that she is a real person with a life too, rather than a know-it-all-lecturer. She has done a great job!” If truth be known, all of us think we are ‘doing a great job’. In any case, we do the best we possibly can; reflecting on our practice as we go and knowing that our perceptions of our teaching can at times be at odds with our students’ perceptions.

### Elizabeth’s Story: I steel myself for what lies ahead in the semester

Everyone has a basic need for stories whether it is listening to or telling them. Stories organise our experiences into yarns of important happenings. It is through the telling of stories that I can connect as a teacher and build a relationship with each of my students — this interaction has the potential for new connections that link us together inside a new yarn. This new yarn we make has the makings of new connections for my students on how they see Aboriginal Australia. More importantly it helps students clarify their role and responsibilities; firstly, as teachers of Indigenous students; and secondly as effective teachers implementing Aboriginal perspectives into their classroom pedagogy.

Prior to commencing the semester I become anxious. An anxiousness that makes me ask what the students are going to be like this year? Some of the students I have had over the years have been outstanding and I have no reservations to suggest that they will make fabulous social justice educators for all students who come to their classrooms. However, my anxiousness is not about these students, it is about those students who resist the notion of social justice education. It is those students who make me tap into my resilience strategies time and time again so I can steel myself for what lies ahead in the semester. These strategies help me cope with the racist notions and comments; strategies that help me cope with the sheer frustrations that people believe and say such rubbish regarding Aboriginal Australians; and strategies that help me to believe that as an Indigenous educator I can assist new teachers to have a positive mindset towards both Indigenous students and the teaching of Aboriginal perspectives across their classroom curricula. Teaching about social justice in Australia is no mean feat, for critical ‘whiteness’ and anti racist pedagogy are two of the crucial underpinnings. For the most part this scares the hell out of many of the students for this is the first time they see and come into contact with their own ‘whiteness’ and privilege. Yet in light of the socio-cultural diversity of students of our classrooms it is necessary to have a unit that focuses on social justice in initial teacher education programs.

This years’ cohort had all the diversity of past years and was a mixture of mature, young and international students. I bore witness to the usual belief that ‘special treatment’ was about how

Aboriginal people paid less tax because they were 'special' right through to the myth of a 'free car' and the fact I am only 'part Aborigine' due to the colour of my skin. I had students who were highly engaged, through to those who had the notion that they were doing this unit purely for the four points and most definitely not for anything to do with their beliefs or their professional praxis as future teachers. However, the one moment of disbelief that stood out for me was the student who was doing the 'black plague' for their Aboriginal Studies assessment. In short, the lesson consisted of teaching primary school students that the 'black plague' had nothing to do with 'black people or the colour of their skin'. It is notions such as this that make me dig deep into my being to bring forth the resilience strategies that help me to teach these students to see and understand Aboriginal Australia through different eyes and with a different understanding. The fact that I am consistently using resilience strategies makes me realise that we still have 'unfinished business' when it comes to Aboriginal Australia.

### Audrey's Story: As a woman of colour I stand proud and tall

I was very proud today as I stood in front of my tutorial group; I stand tall every time I am presented with a new class. I can't stop myself from feeling proud, proud that I got here ... against the odds. I make sure I am well dressed and I have everything well planned, so that the tutorial runs smoothly. As a woman of colour I want to come across as assertive and knowledgeable.

The tutorial room was spacious and we seemed to 'float' in the space. It had good natural light streaming through the windows and the room was warm and comfortable on that winter day. The tutorial consisted of a group of twenty (or so) students that I organised into groups as they would be engaging in group activities all semester. I asked them to move the furniture around, so they could sit in a circle facing each other. This was fine, but for one small group of three women. I will refer to them as Amy, Anne and Deb, who sat right at the back, side-by-side, facing the front of the room, facing me. They seemed happy to sit there ... As the weeks went by 'facing' me became more than just looking me in the 'face', or looking me in-the-eye; facing me was challenging my story as a woman who had experienced racism and disadvantage, facing me was disbelieving the stories of Aboriginal Elders, facing me was contesting the stories of Refugees.

Every week I share a story: something connected to the lecture topic; something that sheds light on a theoretical point; or maybe a story out of the news. It grounds the theory and brings a human dimension to our discussions on issues of social justice. Amy, Anne and Deb were not interested in discussing the content of the readings or of *facing* me with questions with regard to the readings. Their weekly summaries were very brief and without much substance. It was the stories in the videos, the guest lecturer stories; these testimonies that exasperated them. As Anne said: "It's these stories that bug me!" It was mid semester and we were deconstructing Whiteness. I noticed that Anne's group was not participating in the discussions and instead they would nudge each other and whisper into each other's ears. When asked to share their views with the rest of the tutorial group Anne stood up and said "Well, if you want to know, my Mother says you are wrong!" There was a split second of silence, and to my amazement several students turned around to the back of the room. Francis stood up *facing* Anne's group and said:

No, actually your mother is wrong! This country is not made up only with people like you. You are the minority, this country is made up of the likes of people like us, the ones that want to know about our past, the true story, the injustices, to make amends. My Mother is a minister and last Sunday during the service, she read out Audrey's story. All our Mothers would say that your Mother is wrong.

After Francis finished speaking, I asked the class to reflect on what had just happened and write down their thoughts and submit these to me; they had only ten minutes to go until the class ended. There was silence in the room.

That day I forgot to look for the sunlight streaming in from the windows. I felt empty, bare... my throat was bare, my chest was bare, my stomach was bare. How could this happen to me? How could three words 'you are wrong' uttered by a student, dismiss me and strip me to the core? To me this was

the performance of whiteness, not the cutting edge of Social Darwinism whiteness, not even the enactment of South African whiteness, but the ordinariness of everyday whiteness; the slow manufacturing of the white wall. In that moment I realized that as tutor, the white wall would be the biggest hurdle I would need to negotiate. I turn to Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) to make sense of all of this; she writes that we need to face up, to open up our 'interface', to make face and fight. I know I have start all over and may need to do this many, many times over and over again.

### **Helen's Story: I feel heartened that there are fewer complaints**

I have found teaching for a number of years in *Education for Social Justice* very enlightening, but I am apprehensive as I enter my workshops for the first time because each year there seems to be a need to resolve the tension between what students feel is required and what is actually required. Each year, it seems that a small minority challenge and strongly resist what is presented in this unit. So often there is the underlying feeling that because everyone has an opinion about the topics in this unit, then academic rigor is not essential but that 'honest and truthful opinions and feelings' are what counts. While this unit emphasises that we all have different experiences and different 'stories', it is often from a minority that resentment is felt and heard; that complaints are heard, that they know all this 'stuff' already; that this is too easy; that they often feel that they can do this unit without reading the required readings. Then at discussion times and in exams their answers appear totally uninformed. At the same time, students can feel that the content in this unit is too personal and confronting and not academically rigorous enough. For example, one student said "My feelings are torn in the way on how I feel about this unit. I do feel a lot of resentment as I feel guilty each time I attend a lecture, and occasionally it is interesting", while another student wrote "It comes across strongly that we still have much to apologise for and it feels forced down my throat, leaving me too guilty to take anything more from it". This, despite assurances that 'guilt' was not what this unit was about.

However, the stories they hear engender guilt that in turn, seems to lead to the need to assert that they are not racist. This is highlighted in statements like "I personally do not feel that I am a racist person and hearing all the horrible things that my ancestors have done doesn't make the unit that useful, it could insult some." Some, however, start to recognise that they, or their family members, or friends, are indeed racist so that by the third week one student commented "my grandad is so racist, but I cannot talk to him about this". Listening to their discussions, I notice students are highlighting their own privileges, discussing all those 'little things' in life that happen on a daily basis around us that are indeed racist acts, but stating that they feel this is because of the way they were brought up that they are often racist without thinking.

I feel heartened that there are fewer resistances and fewer complaints now than in previous years. There are fewer initial statements like "We don't have any money either" and "Why do we have to learn this?" and more comments that question why they did not learn about Australia's 'other' history at school? Indeed, the majority recognise the importance of social justice and start to notice previously unrecognised racist acts around them. As one student teacher recently exclaimed "This unit has opened my mind to a variety of things that I never really considered before. The Indigenous people of Australia have been treated so badly in the past and without changing the future children's mind set, the cycle will continue".

### **André's Story: At times I doubt my effectiveness**

As I facilitate workshop sessions I am often astounded at the displays of resistance encountered. Understanding where this comes from is perplexing and while not necessarily seen as a personal indictment directed against me it is nevertheless confrontational. A few years ago I embarked on a process of self-reflection and journal writing in order to maintain an effectiveness in my teaching. This has helped me to conceptualise the range of teaching situations that I have encountered and has been instrumental in promoting my understanding of what students in my classrooms require of me. I feel that often I do not get it right because students seem to want me to give them the answers to complex concepts instead of finding them out for themselves. While some of the 'how would you feel' activities address this — where students are asked to reflect how it would be if prejudice,



discrimination or indeed bullying was directed at them personally — resistance continues. What I have determined is that often the unwillingness of students to explore the realities of the ‘Other’ comes from an attitude of ‘why should I have to do this?’ It is as if, because students are paying for their education, either through the Higher Education Contribution Scheme or as full fee paying students, they demand service. I am willing to provide this despite the fact that we can only go so far with the time we have together. As a casual employee of the university I am payed the minimum for my services. Of course, I want to give my students the best, however, I have also found that I am only human and while maintaining my academic integrity, I find that I often need to placate students because they feel that I owe them something. If there was something more I could give, I would.

Some students react negatively to the feedback on their weekly assignment. I invariably see students quickly look to find their final mark; exclamations, sighs and sometimes even whispered criticism of the written comments on their work occurs. Despite the fact that I consistently provide feedback to show students where their work could be strengthened, I have at times been at the receiving end of rebuke, retaliation, and anger, as if the final mark were the all important identifier of their progress and comments such as the following are not unusual:

You said we should write about our own understanding of the reading.

I thought we did not have to reference.

If you wanted us to present in a particular format then you should have shown us exactly how.

There is a constant need to be ‘on the ball’; continuously developing ways to ensure that I teach in ways that maximises students’ learning. Helping students help themselves does not come easily! At times I doubt my effectiveness and feel that my feedback is not sufficiently concrete for students to understand or that I am not considering their points of view. I ask myself if I am sensitive to their needs and lived realities (for instance, work commitment, family obligations). Of course, I do my best but there is always the doubt that maybe I have become blinded to what students are actually saying. When this goes on week after week I find my only outlet is to write about these occurrences to reflect on and try to develop better ways of keeping students engaged for the next time we meet. Indeed, this finds me treading a thin line between academic rigor (what the university expects of students) and students’ perceived sense of entitlement, which comes up more often than I would like. Students are entitled to the best of my services ... and I conduct myself to the full capability of my academic standing, which entails an uncompromising approach to academic rigor and equitable teaching that is pedagogically sound. I expect that as I model best practice my students will in turn, negotiate and fulfil the requirements of the study program.

### Pip’s Story: Keeping it real

Week one of the semester is largely devoted to ‘housekeeping’, leaving nine weeks to bring the personal, the practical and theory to life. Each year without a doubt, keeping it real is the constant that sustains me through the nine weeks. Over the years, little has changed in terms of students’ reaction to and engagement with the unit. Student lifestyles probably have had the most impact, with everyone ‘too’ busy with life outside university. It seems to me that the learning culture is very different from when I was a student. This makes student engagement with — and dialogue about — the material a challenge.

There is always a small group in each tutorial that manages to travel through the unit in their nice little bubble of denial or just take the attitude that the whole thing is ‘crap’ and for nine weeks throw out all encompassing statements that smack you in the face. While this can be frustrating, it is also opportunity to work on those jammed moments and move forward.

Then there is the voice in my head. How on earth am I going engage students in nine weeks? How do I take them on a journey with the key concepts and issues embedded in the unit when it took me fifteen years to make sense of significant life experiences and eight years at university to understand my relationship to racism; or the reality is, how I am racist. Racism is just one of the key concepts; and

while racism is not the central learning element of the unit, it is pivotal. Understanding my positioning in the classroom, and my relationship to power in any context is, for me, a crucial message embedded in *Education for Social Justice*.

I do not think it is a lack of capacity to understand on the part of my students, but rather it is limited time and contact during the semester. The journey goes like this: forward, stop, backup, little bit of round and round, then okay we can move forward again. The thing is, it is very easy for students to get caught in a spiral of personalising the material, rather than sitting in front of it and trying to decipher the messages and tools for teaching practice. Certainly, there are personal journeys to be made, but letting us get side tracked and bogged down is self-defeating. I have to constantly watch for and balance those personal 'Aha' moments with the 'why are we here' times. Remember Teaching! But mostly, it is around racism or more specifically, whiteness where we tend to get muddy. There is a point every year when a good number of student voices get caught in the dichotomy of self/other: who is the 'goodie' and who is the 'baddie'. Students jockey for position: I have come across the defensive 'self', the victim 'other', the empathic 'self' (you know the one with the Aboriginal friend) and the one who proclaims "I understand the Other". Then come the comments: "White people aren't the only racists" or "Whiteness does exactly opposite to what we being told to do". Whoa! Hold on! This is the cliff's edge for me. I have a choice: I can listen and pull it back from the personal to practice or it is all over and they jump. Once they have jumped I have lost them and there is no coming back. Well, not within the context of the unit, anyway. It's very easy for the discussion and the written work to continue to naturalise 'colour' uncritically, losing sight of the discursive nature of the concept. What can I do? So I say: "Remember these are three readings a week out of thousands written on these subjects; there is debate, there is critical discussion going on. We only have nine weeks, so let's stay focused. What's relevant here to your teaching practice? Let's keep it real."

## Reflections on our testimonials

While our individual experiences may be different, there are also similarities that cut across the different ways in which we are positioned as individuals. The snapshots of our experiences contain a multiplicity of issues and cover a vast array of responses and pedagogic strategies. They also alert us to the tensions that exist between our expectations of students as independent adult learners (who want to become teachers) and the expectations of some of our students to 'spoon feed' them every step of the way. Pip is right when she comments that things are different now. Certainly, now that students have to pay for their education, many exhibit a syndrome of entitlement: having all material available on-line; having their emails answered immediately (if not sooner); requiring that we tell them exactly where (to the precise paragraph) they can find certain information; needing to be told where they went wrong (without necessarily reading their tutors' careful and extensive commentaries on their work); demands to tell them how to reference (the web address is in their study guide which they have not read). Indeed, the list of demands appears endless.

While these demands for service are major irritants, we are much more concerned to assist students in their journey through the uncharted territory of interrogating the ways in which they have conceptualized their subject positions. This journey frequently leads them to drawing "on a variety of discourses that actually serve to protect and secure whiteness's dominant position" (Hyttén & Warren, 2003, p. 65); these are discourses that we have heard many times before, however, we also know that it is not easy to understand that

White people contribute to a perpetuation of systemic racism through benefiting from a perpetuating and systemically induced ignorance, a relentless readiness to deny, ignore and dismiss what victims who experience the effects of racism are saying in order that white people can maintain their moral innocence (Applebaum, 2010, p. 46).

In fact, the leap from discourses that 'serve to protect and secure whiteness's dominant position' represents an enormous chasm that can be insurmountable for some of our students. This has left some students very defensive; commenting that social justice is a "bunch of crap" and us feeling that we do not quite measure up as competent educators.

Hence teaching/learning in this context is a highly personal endeavour that impacts on teachers and students alike. Indeed, teaching against the grain is not simply a matter of teaching as one would any other subject because exploring 'race' and racism with white students goes to the core of our constructed identities as we are asked to be reflective about who we are and why we do what we do. For example, as an Aboriginal woman Elizabeth's identity is called into question as she writes about 'unfinished business' and the necessity to steel herself for what lies ahead in the semester; as a woman of colour, Audrey stands proud and tall as she is 'faced' by her students and relives the long and arduous journey that was full of people relentlessly denying her full humanity; Helen looks on the bright side and is pleased that things are getting better; Pip reminds herself 'to keep it real'; while Andre, as a white male calls his effectiveness as a teacher into question even though his teaching evaluations attest to him being an excellent teacher. For Nado matters of social justice and white privilege cause the legacies of nazi Germany to resurface. It is these memories that keep us grounded. Certainly, our social positioning places us in different ways with regard to the strategies we employ, and the impacts that working in this field has on our lives. We have learned to protect ourselves, not only to survive onslaughts of negativity, but to transcend this and give our best, regardless. These are the 'tragedies' of our professional lives.

The danger, of course is that we can lose track of those students for whom the teaching/learning material represents a watershed in their lives. It is these moments that represent our 'triumphs'; triumphs that we do not always acknowledge as such. As teacher educators we have learned to handle high-stress situations and initiate conversations that lead to positive changes in students' attitudes and understanding, but we have also learned to recognize personal triggers and to enact strategies to overcome them. We do not always 'get it right', yet we continue to pursue the impossibility of finding the 'holy grail' of our teaching; to prepare all of our students to be the kind of educator for social justice that we would like to have for our children. This is our hope. As Denzin stated: "Hope is the desire to dream, the desire to change, the desire to improve human existence" (2003, p. 263).

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