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NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN a SPACE CREATED by "INDIGENOUS WAYS of KNOWING": a CASE STUDY

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Abstract

A strong educator-learner relationship is continually identified as the most significant form of involvement affecting the student experience. Yet, within the current dominant higher-educational context, student-faculty interactions are also identified as an area in need of improvement. This paper explores the educator-learner relationship within a space created by "Indigenous pedagogy" and epistemology through a case study conducted with undergraduate students at The University of Western Australia. Within this context distinctions such as "inside" and "outside" the classroom are seen to inhibit interconnectedness within a holistic system of knowing. Extensive qualitative enquiry in the form of observations, non-Indigenous and Indigenous student focus groups and faculty interviews, informed a descriptive case study of the unit offered through the University of Western Australia titled "Aboriginal Ways of Knowing". It was found that this space, as Indigenised, offered students the opportunity to connect spiritually and personally with themselves, one another and their educators. Furthermore, in reading this space as an "interface" between Western and Indigenous systems of knowing, a productive tension emerged in emulation of what Indigenous people experience throughout their daily lives. This research contributes to a growing body of literature indicating the potential of Indigenous pedagogy and epistemologies within the tertiary context.

Introduction

Extensive research has shown that educator-learner interaction, both inside and outside of the classroom, is one of the most important forms of involvement affecting the student experience. Yet, within Western mainstream higher-education systems worldwide, the educator-learner relationship is continually identified as limited (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994). Terenzini and Pascarella (1994), two of the leading researchers regarding the university experience, believe that the university system, as we now know it, is built upon a number of myths. The relevant myth here is that "student academic and non-academic experience are separate and unrelated areas of influence on learning" (1994, p. 196). To dispel this myth, they believe that "a whole new mind set is needed to capitalize on the interrelatedness of the in-and-out-of-the-class influences on student learning and interconnectedness of academic and student affairs" (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994, p. 197). Throughout the proceeding research it emerged that "this mind set" does in fact already exist. Perhaps not in the current dominant educational context, but is encapsulated in the interrelatedness and interconnectedness that is *inherent within Indigenous ways of knowing.*

This case study seeks to provide a tentative exploration of a space within a higher-educational context, not defined by the same perimeters inherent in the current dominant educational system, but rather draws upon Indigenous values, philosophies, and methodologies to inform the learning process. In exploring the relationships nurtured within an Indigenised and "culturally safe" environment, where distinctions such as "inside" and "outside" the classroom are seen to inhibit interconnectedness within a holistic system of knowing, the case study space allowed students the opportunity to connect spiritually and personally with themselves, with one another, their educators and the land. Furthermore, in reading this environment as a "cultural interface" (Nakata, 2007) between Western and Indigenous systems of knowing, a productive tension emerged in emulation of what Indigenous people experience throughout their daily lives.

Caution was practiced in theorising the term "Indigenous ways of knowing" for the purpose of

this case study. The complex and dynamic nature of Indigenous ways of knowing, in addition the degree of diversity amongst Indigenous peoples worldwide, prohibits any universal conceptualisation of an "Indigenous pedagogy". As Biermann and Townsend-Cross (2008, p. 146) suggest "localised articulations are needed to provide the basis for understanding the nature and complexities of such pedagogy". Although, it must also be remembered, as Hall et al. (2000, p. 4) state, "Indigenous knowledge's cannot be dismissed as mere local phenomena. Such knowledge's extend across cultures, histories, geographical spaces as well as across time" and are "partly in response to colonial and 'post-colonial' intrusions" (Hall et al., 2000, p.7).

Through these collective experiences and the underlying philosophies inherent and identified in most Indigenous ways of knowing, a number of similarities emerge. Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing are holistic, contextual and spiritual in nature while learning takes place within reciprocal and interconnected relationships, between people, nature and the land (Biermann & Townsend-Cross, 2008; Cyr, 2007; Lambe, 2003; Morgan, 2003; Semali & Kincheloe, 1999; Smith, 1999; Walker, 2000). Furthermore, a shared history of colonisation and imperial domination provide a collective and united front from which, in part, Indigenised spaces of de-colonisation are informed (Battiste et al., 2002; Cook-Lynn, 1997; Cyr, 2007; Hall et al., 2000; Morgan & Slade, 1998; Nakata, 2004; Dei, 1996).

Throughout this study, the use of binary oppositions has actively been avoided. No particular system of education has being prescribed as better than the other, although the historical processes informing the relationship between Indigenous ways of knowing and the current Western education system have been interrogated, as has the dominant and universally perceived position of an enduring education system imposed by colonialism and assimilationist policies.

Considering that the Western education system has been instrumental in the global imperial and colonial dispossession of Indigenous people from their knowledge, culture, lands and own ways of knowing, this interrogation is justifiable. Particularly when a significant factor contributing to the underrepresentation of Indigenous peoples within higher education is a euro-centric and non-inclusive curricular and campus environment that is foreign and often discriminatory towards Indigenous students (Battiste et al., 2005; McConville, 2002; Nakata & Muspratt, 1994). Therefore, for the sake of anti-colonisation and a space beneficial for all learners, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, this paper focuses on an "Indigenised space" (Nakata, 2004) as the intersection of Aboriginal pedagogy, philosophy and epistemology within a tertiary environment.

Within the dominant Western educational context, relationships, particularly between students and faculty, are consistently identified as neglected (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994). Meaningful relationships within the case study space, between people, the land and learning are treated as the primary site through which the transfer of knowledge takes place.

Student-faculty interactions within Western higher-educational systems

Since the 1970s, extensive research regarding correlations between student experience and involvement and educational outcomes within the context of higher education has been undertaken (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The general contention established is that strong student-faculty relations, particularly outside the classroom, are the most significant form of tertiary involvement (Astin, 1977, 1999; Bess, 1973; Dippelhofer-Stiem, 1986; Endo & Harpel, 1982; Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979). Astin (1993), in his study on how college environments affect student outcomes, contributed to an extensive body of literature which identifies student-faculty interaction as positively correlated to educational outcomes such as cognitive development, motivation, student persistence, institutional commitment and overall satisfaction with the university experience, while also contributing to enhanced personal growth and social development (Astin, 1999; Endo & Harpel, 1982; Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella et al., 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Snow, 1973; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Terenzini & Wright, 1987; Tinto, 1997). Wilson et al.'s (1974) early study of faculty accessibility found that educational practices within the classroom are an important indicator of faculty approachability outside the classroom. Improved accessibility through a more holistic approach to teaching and learning is seen by Kuh (1995) as an integral step in the enhancement of student-faculty interaction beyond the classroom.

Undoubtedly, most research regarding student involvement is quantitative in nature. A more in-depth and detailed analysis of the "educational landscape" through qualitative enquiry may lend itself to an increased understanding of the processes involved in the dynamics and determinants of informal student-faculty interactions. Cotton and Wilson (2006), for example, explore the reasons why students either seek out or avoid contact with faculty. It was revealed that often students are not aware of the potential benefits that may be gained through interaction with faculty and that student's perceptions are highly influenced by their understanding of faculty roles and responsibilities within the university context. Despite this overwhelming body of research indicating the importance of informal student-faculty interactions within the dominant higher-educational context, these relations are continuously identified as limited and in need of improvement.

In stating that educational policies seem to be based more on economic than on educational outcomes, Astin (1993, p. 426) believes that "we need to rethink radically our traditional institutional approach to general education". He goes on further to emphasise the need for less focus on formal structure and increased attention to pedagogy, the interpersonal environment and institutional context within which learning takes place (Astin, 1993).

Indigenous pedagogy

Until relatively recently, much of the research conducted in the area of Indigenous knowledge has been primarily concerned with research methodologies and epistemologies. Unlike our North American counterparts, Indigenous pedagogy and teaching methodologies have undergone limited development within Australia. Although a lacuna exists regarding Indigenous pedagogical concepts, the need for further theoretical exploration of Indigenous pedagogy within the academy has been identified. Biermann and Townsend-Cross (2008, p. 146), in stating that Indigenous pedagogical concepts are under-theorised, recently contended that "Indigenous pedagogy properly analysed, explored and theorized ... has great potential to effect positive educational change for all learners".

There are two outcomes which this study will achieve. First, it will, positively contribute to a growing body of research regarding an Indigenisation of current dominant educational settings. Second, it will provide an empirical basis from which further research and contemplation in the area of Indigenous pedagogy may be undertaken.

A relationship based process

Over a period of four months, extensive qualitative inquiry in the form of observations, undergraduate student focus groups and Indigenous educator interviews formed the basis for a descriptive case study of a history unit, offered to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students at the University of Western Australia, titled "Aboriginal Ways of Knowing". Aboriginal voices and perspectives are embedded in this unit which endeavored to reflect the holistic nature of Aboriginal ways of knowing and the relationships that sustain it. In continuing the focus on relationships within the context of this study, research was conducted within a framework premised on nurturing a connection with those participating in the case study (Walker, 2000).

The unit was offered over one semester by an Indigenous coordinator, although many guest educators, also Aboriginal, participated in its delivery. The student cohort consisted of 25 students, non-Indigenous and Indigenous, 12 of whom directly contributed to focus groups established specifically for the purpose of this case study

Throughout a period of four months, I attended all collective "informal" meetings, such as a fieldtrip to the culturally significant site Wadjemup which is the Nyoongar name for the island non-Indigenous people call Rottnest which is 18 kilometers off the southern coast of Perth, Western Australia, barbeques and other social events, at which both learners and educators were present. Spaces such as lecture halls and tutorial rooms also presented invaluable opportunities to observe interactions between educators and learners. As opposed to lecture and tutorial, I identify "lecture halls" and "tutorials rooms" as spaces because the terms "tutorial" and specifically "lecture" are contradictory to the way the unit was run.

In addition to observation as a source of data collection, a number of focus groups allowed both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to express their own views and experiences of the unit. Considering the historical, social and educational context within which this study is embedded, Kamberelis and Dimitriadis' (2005, p. 888) perception of focus groups as "unique and important formations of collective inquiry where theory, research, pedagogy, and politics converge", the decision to include focus groups was important. Focus groups were conducted in an "informal" setting, with questions leading interactive group discussion. This enabled students to bring up particular points of interest and other students to elaborate on those points.

Throughout the study, intensive conversation and dialogue were undertaken with three Indigenous educators. Those included were Blaze, the coordinator and tutor of the case study unit; Tracy, a second year tutor and Tjalaminu, a frequent guest "sharer" within the case study unit and an educator predominantly involved with Indigenous students beginning their tertiary education.

Learning from relationships

The findings not only reflected student experience within the unit, but also uncovered some of the perceived differences students acknowledged between the unit and their participation within the mainstream higher-educational context. Three Indigenous people reflected upon their experiences as educators and as learners participating within both Western and Indigenous ways of knowing.

What emerged from this case study was that firstly both students and educators felt that the usual limitations or classifications informing relationships within dominant education systems did not exist. Classifications upon educator-learner interaction, such as "formal" or "informal" for example, were instead seen to inhibit meaningful relationships. Any interaction that took place, whether it were to occur within a

classroom or over a coffee was seen as a potential learning experience. Second, a secure space was created where students felt they could safely express themselves in terms of their subjective spirituality. And third, a constructive tension emerged between Indigenous ways of knowing and the standardised research assessment students had to complete at the end of semester. Many of the distinctions emphasised within mainstream education did not translate within the space created by Indigenous ways of knowing. Student-faculty interactions within the mainstream are categorised, for example, as either informal or formal. Throughout the case study, usual classifications became blurred as all learning took place on a personal level. In asking Blaze what was different about the unit compared to his experiences in mainstream education, he replied, "one reason is that this unit is more intimate and personal in comparison to how other units are run". A personal connectedness was also reflected in the students' responses, with a mature age student stating, "I think it puts a human face to it". Another student noted, "Seeing our tutors and lecturers outside the usual classroom or theatre works really well, like you get relaxed with your lecturers and the other students as well". This was further reflected in the following statements, the former made by an Indigenous student:

> As well as having lecturers that haven't come to solely summarise curriculum, but have come to talk to you about what happened to them personally, is also emotionally involving. I don't know whether that is because of the subject matter or the way that it is taught; I feel it is a bit of both.

Another student noted:

> I feel like there isn't that usual distance that I have with some of my other lecturers. But that is what I have loved about this unit, like the humanness. I am doing a history major and this is my third year, I have loved this unit more than anything I have ever done before just because it feels so real and felt relevant, and has been so interesting.

Throughout the unit, both creative and interactive exercises within lectures and tutorials enabled a forum where students further connected with each other and their educators. Tjalaminu, an Indigenous educator that prefers the term "sharing" to lecturing, noted after guiding the students through a creative exercise, "See, relationships between peoples become more free-flowing and connected because we were all enjoying ourselves. Instead of preaching at the students ... we were all working together as a team and it produced wonderful results!" She goes on to say, "Usually there is a lecturer sitting up the front delivering perspectives and when the lecture ends he or she goes out one door and the students out the other! This creates a gap..." Tjalaminu uses the term "gap" to denote the distance between students and faculty when their relations are defined by limitations such as formal and informal or by systems of hierarchy. She believes that "'sharing' could prove to be a wonderful way of bridging gaps and building bridges which would enable people to have a stronger understanding of the knowledge being passed on and a better sense of connection with one another". This "sense of connection", was seen by all the educators participating, as integral in the transfer of knowledge within an Indigenous paradigm. Blaze notes Indigenous ways of knowing by stating:

> Students respond really well to it, and I think that they respond well to it because there is a relationship that is created that allows them space to learn in a different way than they normally have the chance to, particularly non-Indigenous students. In all my experience they really embrace that opportunity.

In asking one Indigenous student how she felt about the personal connections forged within this space, she replied, "I like it that way, its relaxed, I can say whatever I feel and think because it's relaxed, I am not scared of expressing my opinion". Blaze reinforced this space as a safe place in this comment:

> I try to make students feel comfortable, as well as to express any ideas or stereotypes that they may have so we can deconstruct them when they come up. So I try to create a safe learning space for people to be able to wheel those ideas out of their heads and then we can actually look at them and then people can decide for themselves whether that is an attitude that they want to retain or whether they want to replace it with something else.

Therefore, in creating this Indigenised space, an opportunity arises which enables a further (de) colonisation of mainstream education.

In addition to nurturing educator-learner relationships, learning within the case study space was often termed as reciprocal. This was particularly noted through observations during field trips. At one point, during a fieldtrip to Wadjemup, everyone was assembled at a burial site when an educator stated, "Come on you lot! This is reciprocal, we talk to you and you got to talk to us back!". This opened up a comfortable and interactive dialogue. As the group discussion ended, conversations carried on between educators and learners over lunch. The fieldtrip to Wadjemup was a milestone in my research as it was the first time I was really able to see theory become

lived knowledge and experience. This fieldtrip was a journey that challenged many students' identity and perceived notions of place. The Indigenous educators accompanying the trip become guides along that journey.

In addition to being a culturally significant site within Nyoongar dreaming, Wadjemup was also a place of incarceration for Indigenous men and boys throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is the largest site of Aboriginal deaths in custody in Australia and remains a site of contestation as it is also a popular holiday destination for many non-Indigenous Western Australians, who often are not aware of the islands history. This trip proved to be a pivotal moment in the establishment of a connectedness between educators and learners, as one learner affirms:

> I guess after the trip I felt more comfortable in tutorials, sharing my thoughts, I felt like I was no longer intimidated ... I just felt like I was on a more informal level with [the unit coordinator].

Another student noted that before going on the trip, she:

> Wouldn't just ask [the educators] questions, but then on the trip and after it I didn't feel any problem with approaching them and talking to them when I got the chance to. It was really good to get a bit more connected.

On the fieldtrip to Wadjemup, Blaze was wearing a particularly interesting shirt, which generated a comment made by an exchange student from the United States. While humorous, it also uncovered her perception of educators:

> It was kind of refreshing to see a professor out in jeans and a t-shirt that says "Hugs, not drugs" ... It was good to see that he didn't take himself too seriously, like what a lot of my other professors seem to, which was really nice. I like knowing that my professors are human beings and not just academic educators with big PhDs and plaques up on the wall that says, "look I am smarter than you".

The trip to Wadjemup also opened up an opportunity for students, particularly non-Indigenous students, to express themselves in a different way and experience learning in a context previously unfamiliar to them. One student commented that:

> On that trip I experienced a change of perception. What I have learnt is a bit of a different experience. I felt physically different being there at [Wadjemup]. I felt really sad and I felt like there was something really heavy on my chest when we were walking around.

The same student sought refuge in the company of the educators accompanying the excursion. In talking to Tjalaminu who was also accompanying the trip to country, the student stated, "I was becoming lighter and lighter again and by the time we were sitting down I felt okay, but sort of different. That sort of experience showed me there is more to the world than the eye can see and that was an experience where I know it was a different way of learning".

For non-Indigenous students, it seemed that this experience allowed them to express themselves in a manner that they did not usually feel particularly comfortable doing. One student said "You are not able to express that in a lot of Western society, imagine if you were on a science fieldtrip or something and you said that!". Another student again emphasised the space created by the unit as safe, "in a course like this you feel like, yeah, here you can actually express these feelings". Another student from the United States made the following remark:

> It really gives you this new perspective, this new way of looking at things, of understanding. To say "the energy is bad here". We were allowed to say "something is still lingering", which you don't get to say anywhere else, you know? They would be like "no, no you're just being superstitious".

Blaze viewed the fieldtrip as an opportunity to provide students with "a historical, cultural and spiritual experience" as well as an occasion for students to connect with Wadjemup as "country" and as speaker, Blaze explains:

> You can never underestimate the power of being out in country ... country is alive and it is a mover. It can create events and affect the world, so when we take people to country, I take along my self and others as educators, but then there is country which is also a speaker. Country, is the other guest lecturer that we have that people do not often identify, but just by being on the island, country is interacting with them, through the birds and the animals and the feelings and there are all sorts of spiritual beings that are paying attention and looking at the students and seeing what they are doing and you know country itself is asking "who is this mob?". It can be a powerful learning experience.

Another powerful learning experience acknowledged and emphasised by the focus groups was a "tension" created by the contradictory nature of standardised Western methods of assessment and Indigenous ways of knowing. A number of students found it difficult and

often confronting having to mediate between the two, whilst also existing within opposing paradigms. Blaze recognised this tension as potentially constructive:

> It is very hard to reconcile Indigenous approaches with a more narrow writing and research methodology. You have something quite broad and interrelated and interactive with something that can be quite linear, logical and progressive. They are different systems of knowing and learning, however I think that it is within the conflict between the two that a lot of learning takes place.

Furthermore, this tension can be seen as reflective of the way in which Indigenous peoples exist within two worlds on a daily basis. The following remarks made by non-Indigenous students are quite powerful in that they represent the necessary questioning of self that is needed for many to contemplate a much needed change. When discussing the tension between Indigenous ways of knowing and the assessment, broader issues were questioned. One student made the comment that "I think a lot of that tension emerges from us questioning ourselves 'can we do things differently"? Is there another way of doing things?'. Another student stated: "I think we should look at that tension as something to learn from, rather than it being an obstacle". Another student also observed this tension as constructive:

> Yeah, but that's actually one of the things that is productive and interesting about this unit, is that tension between learning non-Western things in a Western environment. I do not necessarily think it is a bad thing. I think that it is just a different way of learning information that is just as important. I think that that tension is a source from which we can learn from in itself.

The findings suggest that, although a few students were not entirely comfortable with this "tension", most felt it was constructive. Thus, in this micro-example, positive change in mainstream attitudes is already evident. Throughout this case study, the most important aspect driving my research was that Indigenous peoples' worldwide are underrepresented within higher-education. Creating a learning environment where Indigenous people and ways of knowing and knowledge are valued and equal is imperative and so too is the Indigenisation of the academy.

Bringing this dialogue to the mainstream

Due to the emphasis placed upon relationships of learning within the case study unit and the holistic nature of Indigenous ways of knowing, it is not surprising that the findings suggest that both students and educators were involved in a powerful learning experience where interconnectedness was paramount. The following discussion will focus on these relationships, while also reviewing the place of spirituality and intuition within higher-educational learning and investigating further the tension experienced within this "interface" between two different ways of knowing.

Within the case study space, learning took place within meaningful relationships between educators and learners, the land and one another. Educator-learner interactions were not compartmentalised into formal-informal or outside-inside-the-classroom, rather all relations were seen as potentially contributing to the personal, social and academic development of both students and educators alike and were nurtured within a "culturally safe" space (Bin-Sallik, 2003). This environment, unclassified as neither "formal" or "informal" is "spiritually, socially and emotionally safe. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and the experience of learning together" (Williams, 1999, p. 213). During the case study students commented that the perceived inaccessibility of faculty within mainstream contexts did not translate into the environment developed by Indigenous ways of knowing. The uninhibited relationships formed within this non-stratified space closed the "gap", using Tjalaminu's term, between learner as passive recipient and educator as disconnected and unapproachable.

Increasingly within mainstream contexts, educator-learner relationships are defined by the compartmentalisation and bureaucratisation of student-faculty interactions for the sake of efficiency and economy (Cotton & Wilson, 2006; Cyr, 2007; Lambe, 2003; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994). This, combined with conventional mainstream pedagogies such as lecturing, place the learner as a passive recipient of information where the educator is often seen as inaccessible.

These stratified constructions of knowledge forms were again interrogated as educators within the case study environment provided an alternative space where students felt they could express themselves spiritually and intuitively without being labeled irrational or "superstitious". This reflects a de-centering of the Western academy where other ways of viewing the world can be valued equally. The West-centric education system has been labeled as "spiritually bankrupt" (Morgan, 2003) and to a large extent responsible for an "erosion of spirituality" (Hall et al., 2000). The "Western order of things" (Nakata, 2004) finds its origin in the enlightenment principles of "reason" and "rationality" which continue to perpetuate an enduring devaluation, denial and exclusion of Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies and knowledge's. Continually, Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being, have been dismissed as "primitive" while interconnectivity and meaningful

relationships between people, learning and the land within this context are dominated and overruled by the West-centric perception that "objectivity" is integral in knowledge transfer and research. On the trip to Wadjemup, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, undertook not only a learning experience different to that provided within the dominant higher educational setting, but it was also provided an opportunity to further connect with their educators in addition to interacting with and learning from the environment surrounding them.

Another powerful learning experience identified within the findings was the tension felt by students at having to operate at an intersection within and between, both the "Western order of things" and Indigenous ways of knowing. Although some learners were not entirely comfortable existing within this interface, it can be viewed as a valuable opportunity to further instill within non-Indigenous students a better understanding of Indigenous standpoints (Nakata, 2004).

Concluding remarks

Leading on from the myth mentioned earlier in this paper, that, "student academic and non-academic experience are separate and unrelated areas of influence on learning", Terenzini and Pascarella (1994, p. 194) state that the current structures in place are "a creature of administrative convenience and budgetary expedience. It surely has not evolved from any conception of how students learn". Furthermore, the continued emphasis on the importance of objectivity within this context produces stratified constructions of knowledge forms which, as Hall et al. (2000, p. 4) suggests "come to acquire an objectified, normal status, the status of truth. Thus they become embedded in the social practices and identities, as well as institutional structure, policies and relationships". Considering that the educator learner relationship is one of the most important forms of student involvement affecting the university experience, it is alarming that after 40 years of research regarding the Western academy and the learner-educator relationship, scant improvement has been made. It may even be suggested that through increased commodification of the learning process, the importance of this relationship may be further relegated. After seeing the success with which the educator-learner relationship was nurtured within a space created by Indigenous ways of knowing, perhaps it may be asked, once again, whether the current system of higher-education is contradictory to the very form through which learning takes place.

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