Critical Indigenous pedagogy meets transformative education in a third space learning experience

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This paper explores the philosophical and theoretical foundations of a first year unit in Aboriginal Studies offered at the University of Notre Dame in Fremantle. It explains how the current approach is inclusive of transformative and critical Indigenous pedagogies and taught from an evolving ‘third space’. Each philosophical underpinning is considered briefly, with reference to informal feedback received from students in 2014. What is suggested is that AB100 is indeed transformational for students in ways that are potentially ongoing in both professional and personal lives. Given the focus of the University of Notre Dame on training students for the professions this has implications for potential ways of teaching and learning that may require uncapping the usual teaching and learning frameworks to actively incorporate transformative and Indigenous pedagogies. Recommended is the need for further investigation and research into the impact of this approach to learning via an evaluation framework based upon the authors PhD outcomes.

Introduction

The writing of this paper evolved from discussions held over many months with Sue Booth, the longest serving tutor in Aboriginal Studies at Fremantle Notre Dame. Sue had been struck over the years about the transformative nature of AB100 and believed it should be captured in some way. Her passion and prompting, alongside the unsolicited responses from students who gave equally unsolicited permission for what they wrote to be shared, compelled me to draw this paper together. These students commented on the impact on their ways of doing, being and relating in the world, of this first year unit in Aboriginal Studies (AB100). Despite the reluctance created by the compulsory nature of AB100, students reflect on the profound impact it has had on them. As two students described it,

I am currently in my fourth year of studying education, and out of 4 years’ worth of individually enriching units, the single most worthwhile and career inspiring has been an elective I chose to undertake this semester called Aboriginal People: AB100.

I will now look at my life as two parts, the first being a time of ignorance, (pre-university, pre-AB100 Aboriginal People, pre-Rob Riley) and the second a time of re-evaluation, recognition, reconciliation and understanding

Background

The Fremantle campus of the University of Notre Dame introduced an elective unit in Aboriginal Studies in 2008. It was developed and taught until 2013 by Stephen Kinnane who is currently Senior Researcher with the Nulungu Research Institute in Broome. The unit has also been offered on the Broome campus and taught by Professor Lyn Henderson-Yates and Dr Jenny Burton. In Fremantle it began with 45 students and developed steadily over the years until it now has a new cohort of 300-350+ students each semester. Most students do this as a compulsory unit in their course with a few taking it as an elective that fits their timetables. Most are not enrolled by choice.

No other undergraduate units are offered at the Fremantle campus in the discipline of Indigenous Studies therefore students’ priority is usually the profession for which they are training and not a desire to study in this field. This became apparent during my first semester of delivering the unit. Subsequently the unit focus shifted slightly, aiming to both engage
This unit has helped shape my philosophy as an educator. It has allowed me to build on my knowledge and recognition of Aboriginal and Australian history, and to understand the importance of reconciliation and a shared history of this country within not only classrooms and schools, but also Australian society.

I am going to be a nurse. This unit has given me a fantastic base and well-rounded understanding of both issues in the past and issues still needing to be addressed in health.

The topics and structure of the unit remain largely unchanged and consider the history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships in Australia. The focus, however, has altered slightly to highlight its relevance to student’s future and present lives. A range of readings from professions such as nursing, education, law, counselling and archeology are included and students are required to actively consider how they can use the knowledge, skills and understanding in their lives as both professionals and citizens. Students often already work and can experience ways to bring about change. One student reflected on how he worked to bring about change in his retail job.

I began this by having one-on-one talks with my boss and colleagues. Our first step was to cease using ‘Aboriginal’ as a noun. Course material informed me that this word was often perceived by Indigenous people as derogatory, in large part due to the history of its use. It came up later that the very topic of my unit was ‘Aboriginal People’. Further research to obtain a guide I could share with my crew identified that most words used to label could offend Aboriginal people of different backgrounds. I finally summarised with my team that ‘Aboriginal person’ was perhaps the most appropriate for the workplace … It is a subtle yet very important difference from calling a person an ‘Aboriginal’. But the point of this exercise was to dissect the manner in which we as employees were using language and may have been perpetuating a negative stigma. The team seemed genuinely open to approaching this issue and supported this change of word-use which is ongoing.

The remainder of this paper considers the philosophical underpinnings of the unit which are the basis of creation of this dynamic learning environment in which students are actively encouraged to develop critical thinking skills. Dudgeon and Fielder (2006, p.396) point out that “Universities, whilst often using the rhetoric of being spaces for critical thinking and freedom of thought, in many ways continue to be places of western cultural hegemony.” We have set out in AB100 to address this tendency by privileging and focusing on Indigenous academic authors and guest speakers as a way of addressing the imbalance students report. Many of them have little or no understanding of history from an Indigenous perspective so it is with the aim of balancing that perspective that we teach.

**AB100 as a third space experience for students**

It has been noted by Indigenous authors such as Little Bear (2000) that there is no purity in either Indigenous or non-Indigenous worldviews; that there has been a meshing of different views with each influencing the other. Similarly Dudgeon and Fielder (2006, p.400) explain Bhabha’s notion of a ‘third space’ as one that does not deify or rarify or claim as pure and innocent either a dominant group or an oppressed group. What our students most often share is a lack of awareness of non-Indigenous perspectives, hence western culture hegemony is more the norm than not. These words from one student eloquently exemplify what we so often hear in students at the start of semester.

Prior to this course I did not appreciate an Indigenous perspective of Australia’s history. The content began to challenge my own perceptions of Indigenous affairs and their struggles. Perhaps the most important fact I learnt was about ‘generational trauma’ (Atkinson, 2012). This helped fill the gap in my understanding and lack of empathy for Indigenous People. It also challenged what I had perceived to be the most reasonable objection to the pursuit of Indigenous rights. … that modern Indigenous Australians were too removed from the dark colonial past to claim any compensation or loss. This
sense of non-Indigenous, equal entitlement is, to my belief, a crucial element to deconstruct in others before true reconciliation can take place.

The vehicle for transformation is the history, from an Indigenous perspective, of this continent since 1788 with an emphasis on relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

**The philosophical underpinnings of AB100**

Prioritising Indigenous voices is important in AB100. The history of Australia since colonisation has largely been recorded by colonisers and their descendants. As noted above, students note at the start of every semester that they have not heard of the history of Australia in a way that includes an Indigenous perspective. Since the unit’s inception students have been required to source and utilise references from Indigenous academics, recognising both the diversity of Indigenous peoples and the beliefs that are common across nations. This is not to say that non-Indigenous perspectives are incorrect, merely that they are incomplete and represent only one version of reality (Corradi-Fiumara, 1992).

Closing this knowledge gap is a first step in building strong relationships. Strong relationships, are required to develop educational programs and services that ensure cultural safety. Cultural safety can only happen with a “focus on building relationships with diverse groups in the community …guided by them as experts in their own needs and lives… [and becoming] more and more aware of how you are perceived by and impact on others.” (Carnes, 2014, p.333).

**Indigenous pedagogies**

The core purpose in traditional Aboriginal societies declares Stanner (1979, p.143) was the uniting of hearts and maintaining of order and equilibrium. Learning was not an added on activity. It was part of all and every day. Diversity was valued, all people of equal value and all had the right to be heard (Atkinson, 2002, pp. 35-36).

Historically Aboriginal people have always been educated, just differently and for different purposes to the western world which has a focus on education as a means of gaining employment and contributing economically to the wider society. Part of the focus in pre-colonised Aboriginal nations included the learning of a spirituality which helped provide the focus and unity for a holistic education that was not siloed into isolated subject learning areas as it is in white, western schooling traditions. This is described by Welch (1998, p.207) who states,

> Aboriginal education was not so much a preparation for life, as an experience of life itself. Spirituality pervaded the whole of life, and thus traditional Aboriginal education was entirely non-secular. Social life, and educative activities such as hunting and gathering, were all informed by religious beliefs, just as topographical features were all products of spirit ancestors. This spirituality helped impart a unity to Aboriginal traditions of education, without the subject divisions common to white schooling practices.
Emeritus Professor Judy Atkinson refers to the 5R’s of respect, rights, responsibility, reciprocity and relatedness as the core of an Indigenous critical pedagogy that has taught Indigenous children for millennia. Atkinson (2012, pp.1-2) describes this way of teaching by Elders across generations as follows.

We learn respect for all life - for who we are. We learn that being respected means we have rights – rights to clean water, healthy food and knowledge for life. From those two r’s we learn responsibility. We cannot be responsible if we have never enjoyed respectful entitlement of our most basic human rights. … within the interaction between rights and responsibilities, in our search for information and understanding, we begin to learn and teach together … We also learn reciprocity, (sharing and caring), from which grows relatedness. These are the essential principles of Indigenous teaching learning practice – an Indigenous critical pedagogy.

Using the 5R’s as a guide in this way, AB100 then becomes more than learning content. It becomes about learning how to incorporate the 5R’s into professional life in interactions with clients, patients, students and colleagues. Indigenous pedagogies therefore align well with notions of transformative education as a process of growing and learning through relating which is also an important part of AB100.

Transformative education

The term transformative education was coined from a 1970’s study conducted by Mezirow that followed the experiences of women returning to college education. Mezirow (2000a, p.xi-ii) identified “perspective transformation” as the central learning process occurring in the personal development of women” returning to college education. The study found that, once transformation had occurred, perspective was not likely to revert to old perceptions. Such transformation is essential for reconciliation to occur. Notre Dame’s website (http://www.nd.edu.au/university/reconciliation.shtml) declares the following commitment to reconciliation,

Notre Dame values the importance of a whole of University approach that recognises and builds on existing commitments to Indigenous education and respect for Indigenous peoples throughout Australia. It is committed to providing strong support for the process of Reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

While the website talks of the embodiment of this commitment being establishing and supporting the Nulungu Research Centre in Broome, AB100 is another living example of how reconciliation can occur in an academic setting in a very real way. Reconciliation is a transformative process that requires building strong relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Anecdotally this appears to be the case in AB100 in relation to perceptions of working respectfully to build strong relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, in both professional and personal life. Unsolicited feedback indicates this is also. For example,

Just wanted to let you know how interesting and inspiring the AB100 unit has been for me. I have learned so much and had the great opportunity to engage in forward thinking dialog with other young people. I wish to incorporate what I have learnt and future teachings to truly make a difference for Aboriginal people with my future Law degree. Your passion has been truly encouraging.

Transformation is not a smooth, steady process but occurs in fits and starts, is likely to stall, particularly at the beginning of transformative learning “with its threat to a long-established sense of order, and later when awareness and insight call for a commitment to action that may seriously threaten important relationships” (Mezirow, 2000a, p.xii). Transformative education then, is likely to mirror this stop, start process and face hurdles at similar stages in implementation.

While needing more evaluation to determine this, anecdotal evidence from tutors suggests this is the case in AB100. One of the tutors, for example, has worked in Indigenous centres prior to being with Notre Dame. She notes the strong resistance and lack of awareness that occurred at the beginning of
the unit and speaks of her surprise at the lack of knowledge and awareness amongst the student body. She says that she has worked for such a long time with people for whom what we teach is part of their life that it was a culture shock for her to be in a position where so many people know nothing of the history. Such ‘border crossings’ (Giroux, 2005) have been noted elsewhere in relation to Indigenous students but it would be of interest to explore experiences of academics presenting to Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups and the adjustment required. I have personally experienced this need to adjust the speed at which a presentation can progress, the depth to which it can go and how much challenging I can do dependent upon how much white noise is in the room.

Transformative education acknowledges and bases itself on the strength and inherent agency within communities, populations, families and individuals. As highlighted by Mezirow (2000a; 2000b), its roots are in the work of critical theorists, most notably Paulo Freire, especially his Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1972). Critical theorists such as Freire are identified by Darder (2002, p.41) as aiming to “achieve a liberatory practice…challenge the conditions that limit social agency and capacity to intervene and change the world”. As pointed out by Mackinlay and Barney (2012), there are similarities between the words and works of Freire and the principles underlying traditional Indigenous education that mean his approach to education has been adopted in various settings by Indigenous practitioners and theorists.

In working with adults it is important for students of any age to be able to, as outlined by Freire (1974, p.48) to “achieve critical consciousness so that they can teach themselves” in new situations. Learning continues beyond the formal classroom and requires critical thinking and the ability to keep and this is what AB100 strives to do; be the launching pad for ongoing life-long learning. While there needs to be more research to follow up past participants of AB100 to see the ongoing impact on their lives, anecdotal feedback such as the following indicate it could well be the case that the AB100 experience sows seeds of critical consciousness that continue to grow.

Regarding the outcomes for this unit, I have been able to progress in regards to many skills and attributes that would allow me to flourish as a successful student, and one day a good role model for my students. I have become confident in having discussions with my peers and others about the topic of Aboriginal people. I have progressed to better expression skills in terms with my communication and writing literacy skills. Frequent discussions with the class allowed me to think on my feet and be a critical thinker; where I can apply the information I learnt in class to think of new and effective strategies

To meet up with students in the future to see how such immediate reflections have been applied in an ongoing way would be useful future research.

Smith (2003) speaks of successful transformative education in New Zealand based on critical pedagogy and the work of Freire. He describes his view of transformative learning like this:

Maori experience tends to suggest that these elements may occur in any order and indeed may all occur simultaneously. [There is also the] idea of simultaneous engagement with more than one element. ... All Maori can be plotted somewhere … (some are standing still, some are going backwards, others are well advanced) - the point is that every Maori is in the struggle whether they like it or not, whether they know it or not.

Similarly, every non-Indigenous educator, academic or student is on a continuum of awareness in relation to Indigenous people and attitudes towards Indigenous people – whether we know it or not. Such a transformative understanding of learning includes everyone in some way. No one has to pass a test or jump through hoops of selection to be involved, included and valued. The starting point is wherever the individual is. In AB100 students are at very different stages of awareness on the continuum of knowledge, skills and understanding in relation to Indigenous Studies but all can succeed in this unit from their starting point.
How this is put into practice

Indigenous world views and ways of working place relationship at the centre, as explained by Carnes (2011, pp.176-177). Similarly, Freire (1972, p.61) believes that dialogue and being in relationship are essential to transform the current reality of those who are oppressed, revealing his belief that “no one can say a true word alone – nor can he say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs them of their words”. Dialogue and relationship with one another and the world of which we are a part are at the heart of both transformative education and Indigenous world views. Operating from a third space also necessitates a tweaking of some assessments to meet applied learning needs. Assessments that are open ended and rubrics that are inclusive of skills such as self-reflexivity have been included in AB100. Students reflecting in their final tutorial made these comments.

It made such a difference that we had to go out and connect with others and put reconciliation into action in our own lives. I kind of understood before then but it wasn’t real.

I didn’t really understand until I was face to face with an Aboriginal person. I had known them for years and been their friend but we had never talked about what all this meant for them. It kind of made us closer you know.

I really didn’t want to do the RAP. It seemed stupid. Now I understand what you meant about it making sense as we did it. It’s a different kind of learning. It’s only made sense in doing it.

Others close to students notice it too. Memorably, there was one student’s mother whom I saw at a university function. She said,

AB100 changed [student’s name]. He had some very weird and racist views. This unit changed his life and how he lives it. He is a much kinder person who thinks more now.

Transformative education ensures transformation not only of people traditionally oppressed but those with whom they work. It requires interaction and learning from (rather than saving) people whose worldview has been obscured by western hegemony. A third space creates a new way of working that incorporates and respects different world views. An academic third space does so in a way that respects both academic and cultural rigour. This can have a powerful impact as the following illustrates.

I have had the privilege of being exposed to education in AB100 that has provided incredible insight with respect to Australia’s history. The power of education is certainly not to be underestimated and I now pass on my knowledge to the people around me and in particular, to my children, who are the future for an optimistic outcome in relation to connection with Aboriginal peoples. My perception and awareness of reconciliation has generated thinking and conversations that I would never have engaged in and I now understand why Aboriginal people believe they have been treated unfairly.

I believe that it is not entirely the role of the education system and/or the government but it is the role of the individual to be open to differences and motivated to improve equality for all Australian people. Education and the government can only do so much to nurture reconciliation, but we as a community need to be motivated to see each other as equals.

Walking the fine line between self-reflexivity and navel gazing

One of the incredibly rewarding things about this kind of education is that it is reciprocal with an ongoing learning by the teachers as well. There is, however, an important word of caution needed here. We have to be mindful of not colonising the discipline of Indigenous Studies. There is a fine line between growing self-awareness and navel gazing that places the student at the centre of their universe. This is a learning curve in a third space; learning that the collective matters too. Non-Indigenous people often have some predictable reactions on their journey of transformation.
These have been written about by Rains (1998) and are summarised in the figure below. The information in this figure is a useful tool when individual students encounter responses within themselves or from others that they struggle to understand.

Figure 2: Common reactions to hearing about privilege (Carnes, 2014, p.340)

There is a continuum that people will be on in this awareness journey and everyone starts somewhere. What is vital is remembering to keep the gaze on the relationship rather than slipping into what can be a perpetuation of the hegemonic norm. The need to actively transform this tendency is illustrated in the words of Foley (2007, p.124) who says,

… don’t let your students and yourself become tourists looking on Aboriginal culture with romantic visions or viewing it as if it were a prehistoric relic… embrace it, enjoy it… Do not let Aboriginal or Indigenous studies remain tokenistic. Help us destroy the eighteenth and nineteenth century myths and stereotypes that still plague the thoughts of many settler Australians.

For such a journey to succeed appropriate guides are essential. Tutors in this unit are able to make the journey with the students. The focus is not drilling content; it is using content knowledge and awareness to apply learning. Therefore, tutors may or may not have a strong academic background, though they will need to be able to support students at a first year unit level. What is vital is their hands-on journey alongside Aboriginal peoples, working with and learning from them. Tutors need to have strong relationships of their own with Indigenous peoples and community. They need to have undertaken their own journey to be equipped to guide others on it. Academic learning alone is not sufficient. We have been fortunate to have such fabulous people in AB100 since its inception.

The purpose of AB100 is not to arouse feelings of guilt, as that helps no one. The purpose is building strong relationships using, as the base, the 5 R’s of Respect, Reciprocity, Relatedness, Rights and Responsibilities (Atkinson, 2012). These five concepts provide students with something that is easy to remember in situ when working with Indigenous clients and colleagues. They can consider how each is being exhibited in the current situation. As one student notes, this is something he can use in any situation with any people.

Respect, reciprocity, relatedness, rights and responsibilities are all influential for maintaining work settings … working with people from all backgrounds. … Working with people of differing backgrounds within the workplace allows for a diversity of experience which can spill over into a person’s social life. Harmony in the workplace can influence society as whole… this understanding has been influenced by the new knowledge I have acquired in AB100.
This comment illustrates something else we emphasise in AB100; the importance of what non-Indigenous individuals, communities and organisations can learn from Indigenous ways of understanding. This is the kind of coming together of ideas that can help create third spaces.

**Further evaluation of AB100 success in creating a third space required**

Student comments in here are anecdotal and unsolicited so could well represent the keenest students. It is worth noting, however, that tutors find each semester that some of the strongest learning has occurred for students who initially were not engaged at all.

Ultimately it will be evaluation from a third space by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people that will determine success. Anecdotal feedback from one of our tutors who is an Indigenous consultant in cultural awareness training and who has taught or studied at two other universities, is that this is a very powerful unit that strongly encourages a degree of reflection on and application of the content that can bring about lasting change. From her experience this is what sets AB100 apart from other units.

A limitation of just focusing on self-reported outcomes is that we have no real idea of what the ultimate impact of AB100 is on the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. To not do this risks colonisation of the evaluation and being limited to a one-side only view of the impact. More formal evaluation that incorporates Indigenous views of the impact is ethically very important. The questions in the figure below reveal some ways in which to address this limitation.

**Evaluation questions**

Creation of a third space requires *unsettling of white noise* which, explains Carnes (2011, p.171) refers to “the interference created by dominant colonial-centric world views and practices that leads to fuzzy, indistinct reception of Indigenous voices by non-Indigenous” people, organisations and systems. As much a systemic issue as an individual one, it results from assumed privilege and lack of knowledge of worldviews other than the dominant.

In evaluating success of a transformative unit such as this one that needs to be both culturally and academically rigorous, the following questions (Carnes, 2014, pp.344-346) may be very useful. These questions require critical reflection on the part of course designers, curriculum writers, teachers and those evaluating success in working with Indigenous peoples. Such critical thinking helps avoid complacency about white noise that is flying under the radar. The questions also are designed to encourage discussion about the meanings of the terms, why it is important to consider these issues of sovereignty, historical trauma, cultural self-awareness of wadjellas, strength and agency of Aboriginal peoples and communities. The most powerful question, and one which is central to encouraging critical thinking amongst students is ‘who decides?’ Such questioning can begin a dialogue to unsettle white noise and the *danger of the single story* (Adichie, 2009), otherwise known as western hegemony.

Such an approach to educational and curriculum design and evaluation has partnership and building of strong relationships at the centre, in line with one definition of reconciliation provided by the New South Wales Reconciliation Council (http://www.nswreconciliation.org.au/what-is-reconciliation/understanding-reconciliation).

Reconciliation is about recognising the truth of Australia’s history, and moving forward together with a commitment to social justice, and building relationships based on mutual understanding, respect and trust. In its broadest sense ‘reconciliation’ means ‘coming together’.

AB100 therefore has an aim of utilising transformative education, critical Indigenous pedagogy to create a third space for learning and actively building strong relationships that support reconciliation.
Figure 3: Questions that address white noise in development and evaluation of programs, services and curriculum (Carnes, 2014, p.344-346)

Conclusions

The paper has explained the underpinning structures of AB100 on Fremantle campus. At this stage, preliminary, anecdotal feedback is supportive of this transformative approach that is inclusive of critical indigenous pedagogy (Atkinson, 2012) and aims to work from a third space (Bhabha, 2004). It appears that this approach could have implications for uncapping teaching and learning in an academic context. The next step recommended is for collection of data from students through a research process that has been designed and implemented with the student’s knowledge and co-operation. This preliminary paper highlights potential for further culturally and academically rigorous exploration. Also of importance is further exploration of a way in which to consider the impact of this unit as a vehicle for reconciliation in relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. This suggests the value of a longitudinal study with current students or follow up from past cohorts. Vital, to ensure we model operation from a third space, is inclusion of research methods that allow for
meaningful evaluation of perception of Indigenous colleagues and clients working with graduates of AB100.

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References


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