GATHERING NO MOSS? EXAMINING DISCOURSES OF EXCLUSION FOR REMOTE AND INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

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How does it feel to be on your own?
Like a complete unknown?
With no direction home?
Just like a ...

Many teacher educators today will find little difficulty in completing this cloze – but Bob Dylan's understanding of the outsider may not be one that we share in terms of our own experience as teacher educators. Our concern in this paper is to suggest that such an understanding may also be one that we do not often concern ourselves with on behalf of those of our own students who study in remote and isolated settings and from a position outside of the discourse communities of school and university education.

How does it feel, at thirty-three, to be the only person in your home who has ever tried to study at university – let alone by Distance Education? How does it feel to studiously ignore the gibes of your children or your friends about people learning to be teachers in schools, not out of books? How does it feel to know that although you can read the words of the instructions and articles sent to you in the thick and efficiently-presented study guides, reading blocks and textbooks prepared by your 'lecturers' to guide you through the subject, you don't actually understand them, no matter how many times you read them through, line by line, from beginning to end? How does it feel to pick up the phone to call the tutor whose name appears on the first page of the study guide, after telling yourself that you can at least try to see if she can explain it – to find a recorded message on the other end of the line, asking you to leave a message or send an email? How does that immediate feeling of guilty relief position you as a failure, and make it even harder to call again tomorrow? How does it feel not to send in your assignment, worked over laboriously for hours while the kids were at footy, or asleep, because when you did finally get through to your tutor she reminded you of the importance of 'correct referencing' if the assignment is to pass? How does it feel not to know what correct referencing is? How does it feel ... to be on your own?

INTRODUCTION

We work in an institution that provides Teacher (and Nurse) Education to a large cohort of students around the nation and around the globe. The majority of our teacher education students studying by Distance Education are not like the student characterised above. They are postgraduates, and, we believe, begin their study with us as already successful students in the higher education environment. They do know how to reference their source material in essays and assignments. They do know how to surf the Internet, and scan and skim the print and electronic texts that they are provided with in order to read their course materials effectively. They do know how to order recommended support material from the library, and they do have computers in their

homes that are available for their own use at convenient times, with a reliable Internet connection that enables them to take part in online subject forum discussions and read the questions other students are asking. More importantly, they do feel able to *speak* in these forums, and can give voice (or phrase) to questions that sound like the questions other people are asking, and will not expose their newness and ignorance, and to which other students will respond. But even among this already well-educated cohort, there are students isolated and 'on their own' because of particular circumstances that make it difficult to study and complete the course effectively.

In this paper we provide an account of the research process, context and the initial results of what has begun as an action research project that we are presently undertaking with colleagues across the three Schools in the Faculties of Education and Health at CSU. As well as employing critical theory in attempting to change our practices through action research, though, we are using poststructuralist feminist theories of identity formation, which understand the process of becoming a social subject in and through discursive practice as a continuous project of fashioning or piecing together an always incoherent and unfinished self. This enables us to move beyond traditional constructivist accounts of learning where a pre-formed student self (in this case it would be an 'isolated and inadequate' self) becomes more knowledgeable through engagement in the teaching-learning process. From this point of view it would be simple to assume that if we were to talk to our remote and isolated Indigenous students about the problems they are experiencing, and attempt to alleviate the effects of these problems by our actions, then these students would become 'different' – successful learners, reaping the benefits of their journey through the program we offer.

The problem with this notion of change and 'empowerment, though, is that this student 'self' always pre-exists immediate experience. However such a modernist understanding of a rational subject is no longer a sufficient or useful basis on which to conceptualise the practice of teaching and learning. We need to think about 'how it *does* feel' to be the student under discussion here – and in that way acknowledge the idea of human subjectivity as diffuse, multiple and always 'under construction' - not singular, or 'essential' (Henriques et al., 1994). It will be produced differently in different circumstances. In this way we are providing a challenge to the basic premise of 'conscientization' and 'empowerment' that we are simultaneously aiming for through the action research process. We are using each of these theories to do things we feel the other cannot adequately do – to stitch up a solution, using poststructuralist threads to stitch together the cloth of critical action research.

We argue here that in order to bring about useful changes to existing educational practices that promote inequity and injustice to some of our students in relation to others, we need to use a range of research methods that will enable us to deal adequately with the complexity of the issue. We have invoked Deleuze's (1977) notion of theory as the 'toolbox' for research, but have called up, instead, a metaphor of theory as a 'sewing kit' from which educational researchers may extract particular spools of thread, pins, needles, crochet hooks, buttons or spindles as the need arises – in order to piece together an appropriate solution to a research problem. In this way, we are finding that our theoretical and methodological toolboxes or sewing kits need to be more functional than tidy. But however inseparable our materials might become as elements in the finished piece of work, they always retain their own forms and qualities in the sewing. Cotton, when stitched onto felt, or woven with silk, does not blend with the other material. Their

differences enhance each other in the particular artefact being created. In this way the metaphor of the sewing box allows us to avoid making a claim for a 'hybrid methodology' here, but rather for a mindful assemblage of useful theoretical approaches to researching the problem of remote and isolated Indigenous students in our teaching. Brought together in their differences, through contiguity and contrast, the range of theoretical perspectives we explore here might help us understand the complexities of the research situation more fully. The patchwork methodology that is produced appears to resemble 'bricolage', which Denzin and Lincoln (1994 p.2) characterise as being 'flexible and responsive', deploying 'whatever research strategies, methods or empirical materials are at hand, to get the job done'. The element of chance and creative surprise that characterises bricolage, however, is not part of our design. Our decision to piece together accounts of student (and academic) identity formation through action does not depend on what we find in the field as we go.

We simply want to use more of the materials in our sewing kit here — because, if Foucault's argument that truth is always a construction of discourse is to be taken seriously, then we are able to act in the knowledge that we have available to us a range of truths that we can speak about our research problem, simply by investigating it from more than one theoretical perspective. Beginning a project that seeks to embroider a solution rather than spin a single answer is both powerful and productive for the project of social change. Weaving our methodology from threads of critical action research and post-structuralist feminism (Haraway 1988; Lather 1991) enables us to accept that the problem we are researching is in fact more complex than can be solved by the employment of a research technology alone.

BACKGROUND

The Faculties of Education and Health at CSU traditionally attract larger numbers of Indigenous women to commence or return to study than others at CSU (CSU Student Services Equity Office 2003), where many students located in remote or isolated areas choose to study by Distance Education. This allows them to maintain their work and families without relocating to larger urban areas. Current statistics indicate that students from remote and Indigenous backgrounds studying at undergraduate level by distance education do not all fare well and are at greater risk than other students of non-completion. We argue that these 'failures' are often a result of the students' unfamiliarity with the discourses of university study (including organizational structures, values and priorities) that are taken for granted by staff. Without awareness of our own assumptions and beliefs about what students know, have and can do in their study environments, our teaching materials, technologies and modes of interaction can alienate and further distance unsupported students who are attempting to study alone.

We were alerted to this problem by our colleagues in the School of Nursing, who have been working on a large interview study as part of an ARC Linkage project entitled 'Developing partnerships to support remote and Indigenous nursing students through distance education' (Gibb and Hamilton 2001-2003). We talked about what they initially considered to be a problem with some modes of instruction and staff-student interaction in the Faculty of Health. This was reported in interviews as alienating and disempowering to students studying alone at a distance, without the support or experience that is clearly taken for granted by DE materials and subject organization. As we talked, we realised that much of the knowledge being generated by this project

resonates with the experience of remote and Indigenous teacher education students in our own programs of study – and that we did not have an 'answer' to help them.

Many of our isolated Indigenous and non-Indigenous students lack the support structures they need to successfully integrate into the university environment. External factors often impact on their learning, and even with the dedicated support of services such as the Indigenous Education Unit at CSU, our structures are not flexible enough, or, it seems, appropriately and well-enough constructed, to cater for their needs. This in turn leads to withdrawal from subjects and in the worst cases, the decision to withdraw from the course as a whole. As teacher educators we see this as a significant problem, for while some of our highest-achieving on-campus students are young Indigenous women, we do not have large numbers of Indigenous teachers seeking to join the profession (Collins 2000), and those studying by DE, just like in Nursing, are more likely than our non-Indigenous students, to drop out.

ACTION RESEARCH FOR IMPROVED PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

In order to bring about some beneficial change to our pedagogy and support structures for these educationally disadvantaged groups, we have begun a small-scale action research project focused on two 2003 pre-service DE subjects which include isolated (within Australia and overseas) and Indigenous Teacher Education students among their cohort. We are working in two very different programs: the Bachelor of Teaching (Birth to Five years) and the Graduate Diploma in Education. This study is being simultaneously replicated in the Faculty of Health, by our research collaborators in the School of Nursing, and the School of Community Health.

The Bachelor of Teaching (Birth to Five years) caters for early childhood professionals who have some TAFE early childhood children's services qualifications and are seeking a supplementary educational qualification. This group has several Indigenous women among the cohort in 2003, all of whom are mature aged working women who have to juggle family, work and study commitments. A number of these have also been out of the study arena for some time, and find the inclusion of computer access and forum requirements daunting concepts to deal with without support. While some students do cope easily with technology, the timeframes for assessment are often inflexible and overwhelming. On this basis we are concerned to see how explicit attention to our current academic and administrative policies and practices can work to improve them. In this way we may be able to better support these students, and enhance their induction into the profession of teaching.

The Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) attracts a very different cohort of students. These people do have a tertiary degree, but many have earned this some time ago and in situations far different from those in which they are currently studying. Many of them are not of immediate concern to us in this study, but some are: students who may be working overseas, living in remote and isolated rural settings around Australia, or even in large metropolitan centres but who consider themselves out of touch with the norms and expectations of tertiary level study at the present time. Examination of course and subject material, both online and in printed format has indicated several areas where discursive norms assume a student who conforms to a fairly narrow social norm, and constructs a student reader who *already possesses* many of the characteristics deemed necessary by graduation. Our analysis of this material has served as the basis for our

first level of action – changing our language to use words and meanings that include rather than exclude non-expert and isolated students.

The action cycle we have designed follows the model suggested by Kemmis & McTaggart (1992), and began with a period of reconnaissance of the situation as experienced by remote and Indigenous Distance Education students in two subjects, currently taught in each of the courses mentioned above. Students taking the Grad Dip Ed subject *ESS 490 Adolescence and Exceptionality* will be asked to reflect on the forum about their learning experiences in the subject over the semester, and about whether they consider there are any other ways they could have demonstrated what they have learnt. Similarly, an Indigenous student taking the BTeach (0-5Yrs) subject *EPT 308 Windows to the Community*, who did not participate at all in the on-line forum discussions with her fellow students, but who did make individual contact with her subject coordinator was informally asked the same questions, along with all other students in the subject who have not participated in the forum.

From this period of data gathering, we have formulated an action plan based on the evidence that the aspects of tertiary study most foreboding and worrying for our Indigenous and remote students centre around the issue of assessment. All of our DE assessment tasks are in the form of written text. For those students new to study, and not familiar either with standard Australian English or the norms of academic prose style, making the 'essay' representative of what you know can be a difficult task.

ACTION RESEARCH AND QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY IN TEACHER EDUCATION

We have chosen the critical approach afforded by an action research methodology (Carr and Kemmis 1982; Kemmis and McTaggart 1992) in order to address the problem through reform of our own language, organization and relationships with these students, and so bring about an improvement both in our own teaching practice and in their experience as learners. We see this as an equity issue, and have been supported in our study by Higher Education Equity Program funding through CSU's Equity Program. Educational action research seeks to bring about change, and improve social relationships and institutional practices in the research setting. It requires the researchers to focus on a real problem in their working environment, and then systematically analyse the situation, reflect on it in collaboration with others who share the concern, plan action that will improve the situation for students, implement the action plan, reflect on the intervention, plan a subsequent action and so on. It is in every way a cyclical and reflective process that mirrors what we see as *good teaching* - and therefore an essential part of our work as teacher educators. However it is not enough to rely on the action research process by itself to bring about sustainable change. 'Doing action research', while undoubtedly a Good Thing for both teacher professional development and improved student outcomes, will not guarantee that the effects of our study can be built upon to actually transform the experience of students (and teachers) beyond the immediate collaborative group that is involved in the study. To attend to that wider dimension of our work we need additional theoretical tools that can account for change in teacher and student behaviour at a level or in ways that are beyond immediate action.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS FOR IDENTITY WORK

We sought first of all to analyse the discursive environment into which our students enter as newcomers to a discourse community that shares certain assumptions about teaching and learning. What do the learning materials our students work with look and 'sound' like? How does the language of the study guides and subject outlines – directly under our control as writers and subject coordinators – position remote and isolated students as learners.

An Indigenous student from the Bachelor of Teaching (Birth to Five Years) program pondered on her inability to engage in the communication processes of the university community:

> *I don't know if it's my culture or what....maybe just me....but some of the stuff is just lots of words. I have to read over and over but I don't get the picture.*

In discussing the print materials with this student it became clear that the barriers to entering the teaching and learning relationship in this case were not related to individual inadequacies. Using the lens that this student suggested in her comments the subject coordinator completed an initial evaluation of the learning materials for the subject. The student is also currently reviewing the material more closely to provide specific feedback for consideration in future development.

The lens suggested by the student was not one related to the vocabulary used rather it focused on another level of accessibility. On-line forum interactions are not "real" to all students. The setting out, volume of print, headings, page breaks, tables and connections between different documents suggest an "order" of thinking, teaching and learning that we take for granted. In all attempts to guide students through a subject outline we confuse and place barriers in front of the very students for whom we wish to provide educational opportunities.

The subject outline for *EPT308* includes the following identified barriers:
* blocks of generic information,
* reference to a separate "Distance education manual",
* a suggested study schedule that runs over two pages and refers a text list from a previous page,
* an assessment summary presented in a table without column markers, and
* generic information about exams when there is no exam in the subject.

This brief evaluation of the subject outline and further conversations with students directed the team's attention to the mass of other information provided to students when they are offered a place in the course. A maze of forms, booklets, pamphlets, instruction sheets, payment forms, schedules of fees, IT information, cashier envelopes, subject availability lists, welcome notes and websites all with "important information" present a very confused "picture" for some students and very few leads on how to find answers to questions that are important for the students. One student suggested that a set of "Frequently Asked Questions" sheets should be developed as the ones used when enquiring about the course and in the Professional Experience Handbook for *EPT308* had been "great".

...finally I got what I needed to do....

Far from welcoming all students into our program, the material provided in different forms prompts some students to consider themselves as not belonging to this academic community. The identity that the individual student takes on is shaped by seeing themselves as an outsider. Their ability to develop in this context means that they do not value their own experiences and skills in order to move forward. They consider themselves to always be "less" than others in this community of teaching and learning.

The project will continue from these initial considerations to explore how other acts of exclusion can be removed and replaced by scaffolding to support and embrace new members of the teaching and learning community.

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