Critical Pedagogical Practice through Cultural Studies

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Abstract: There can be no more significant purpose for the Humanities than to promote the exploration and understanding of what it means to be human, yet one of the more problematic aspects of this is in connecting understandings of Self and Other in emancipatory, non-exploitative ways. This paper reports on one approach to this used in a suite of two cultural studies-based courses taught in an initial teacher education program in Australia. It briefly discusses the epistemological and emancipatory imperatives that anchor a critical pedagogical base for the course but focuses primarily on the use of critical autoethnography as a teaching tool in the pursuit of criticality and a concomitant commitment to social betterment. Drawing upon evidence derived from a larger research project, the paper concludes with a critical reflection upon the role of the socially-transformative educator in a cultural studies context.

Keywords: Cultural Studies, Critical Pedagogy, Teacher Education

Introduction

IT IS SOMETIMES easy for those of us who live in the (so-called) West to forget that we live relatively comfortable lives. That we generally don't have to contend with significant conflicts on our doorstep (wars are always elsewhere), that we have ready access to resources and that most of us have food and shelter in abundance go largely unnoticed as 'normal' aspects of living. This is particularly so if you happen to be white and affluent. While we might see disaster beamed to us from various parts of the globe, including some parts of our own neighborhoods, we are generally shielded from human tragedy, hardship and terror. Our 'normal' doesn't include these things; these are the things that happen in 'abnormal' situations, to Other people

This isn't to suggest however that we in the West don't feel anything for those people who do live with daily bomb strikes, the reality of poverty and disease and social contexts that carry potential for imprisonment or death with a wrongly spoken word. We indeed know these things occur, and perhaps are horrified that they happen, but they are for the best part considered to be 'over there' in places and spaces that are distant from our own (even if they happen to be in the next suburb from ours) and contain people who are in our experiences of them largely images on a television screen.

It was from this perspective that we approached work with a group of undergraduate, first year Bachelor of Education students at the University of Southern Queensland. Through two separate foundations courses we variously exposed our students to issues of inequality, emancipatory pedagogical practice and social justice whilst challenging them to think about their own positionality as social agents. While not necessarily attracting the wealthiest of students, the University is located in an affluent regional Australian city and by virtue of the fact that our students are indeed students of a university *in* Australia (one of the most heavily urbanized, 'developed' and wealthy countries in the world), are in general terms at least, amongst the more economically-advantaged sections of the world's population. We are of course talking in global terms here, because it is, we suggest, through global issues that our students see who they are and might begin to interrogate the positions they hold.

We argue that we can no longer simply excuse things that go on 'over there' as being remote and inapplicable to us, if indeed we ever could. Stark inequalities do permeate the world we live in and do occur in our own neighborhoods even though we often explain away such pathologised existences as being somehow the 'fault' of the people in these predicaments. Rather than being considered as just the unfortunate side effects of global capital, or simply the bad luck of those unfortunate enough to be on the wrong side of affluence, peace and safety, we actively challenge our students to consider the implications of inequality by situating them in global processes. We ask them to consider how they, as pre-service educators, might begin to engage the world with a liberatory practice.

In the project that this paper reports from we explore ideas of inequality and the thoughts our students have about questions of social justice. The project, having now run in excess of 3 years, records students' interrogation of their own positionality as arbitrated by such identity characteristics as race and

ethnicity, class and gender- the 'axes of identity' as we've called them in previous works (see Austin 2005, Hickey and Austin 2007). This paper specifically reports on one aspect of this larger project and considers how our students' understandings of racial and ethnic difference manifest as an aspect of their identities and how they came to position Others according to perceived racial and ethnic attributes.

We were particularly interested in how our students established a sense of Self and Other-ness via a cultural studies approach that sought to identify how marginalization and privilege operate in terms of the axes of identity. The urgency for this type of disruptive work was initially brought home to us when one of our students, in recording his reaction to a particular article set as a reading for one of our courses wrote:

> *After reading this article, I came to realize that I do not have a traditional culture as such that is filled with customs...People were punished severly (sic) by aboriginal (sic) law, which was not written text, whilst we have a standard justice system.* (James, 2004)

The invisibility of the White location in James's *weltanschauung* was startling to us, and provoked us to consider the question of how everyday experiences of the Self might be utilized as tools for the development of a critical pedagogy when deployed as prompts for *conscientisation*. Captured in this paper is the explication of some of our students' recent experiences in their exploration of racial and ethnic identity, particularly as these emerged as these students began to take account of their emerging pedagogies.

Cultural Studies and the Pedagogue

We suggest that there is no more important understanding for pre-service educators to develop than a knowledge of how difference functions, and more particularly how it positions people wanting to teach- in our case, primarily 'white' and affluent undergraduate students. To be a teacher is to hold a significant position in society, a position that carries authority grounded in knowledge and a certain power attached to the education of youth. As such, it seems imperative that as important social actors, educators must understand the dynamics of inequality and marginalization, must lead a challenge for the critique of these things and must prompt the deliberate and open discussion of social issues with not only their students, but the wider communities in which they work. We suggest that 'rage is not enough', to borrow from Ginnie Oleson (2000: 215), and actively push our students to not only come to terms with their own social positioning but to engage and challenge systems of marginalization that they encounter now as students and later as educators. Here we are looking to push our students towards a *conscientisation* of sorts, which, as Freire (1972) would note is about coming to terms with systems of marginalization and privilege that pervade the worlds in which we operate.

It seemed that the best way to tackle this was via the engagement of representations of identity drawn from popular culture. Through the exploration and critical interrogation of dominant images carried by popular culture, we suggest that an understanding of how social narratives reinforce marginalization and privilege is possible. In order to do this we applied a cultural studies approach that:

> *combines hermeneutic focus on lived realities, a (post)structuralist critical analysis of discourses that mediate our experiences and realities, and a contextualist/realist investigation of historical, social and political structures of power* (Saukko 2005: 343).

The point was to expose and interrogate the widely held, but rarely interrogated, myths of popular culture and the mediating influences these have on our identities via the deconstruction of '...its logic, its arrangements, its explicit and implicit rules' (Miles and Huberman 1994: 6). Here we wanted to look at the way that certain axes of identity in particular were represented in everyday forms and the way that certain representations of race and ethnicity, class location and gender are positioned as 'normal'. In order to understand how we as individuals living in the 21st century come to terms with our own senses of self when bombarded with regimes of representation, the excavation of the 'mundane' and everyday (Hester and Francis 2003; Brekhus 1998) provided an accessible and rich location for analysis of these dominant images.

Given that the myths and imagery of the everyday saturate almost every aspect of our contemporary lives- from television programs to idle gossip in a hair salon- we applied this interrogation as an exploration of the entire *logic* of the cultural contexts in which it is held. We run the premise that the 'everyday' functions as a location from which social assumptions work as both a mediator of what is 'normal' (and indeed 'abnormal') and the reference point from which we take our cultural cues. In this sense, it seemed appropriate to launch our discussions with our students about privilege and marginalization as seen via the axes of identity when played out in the cultural products of the everyday.

A cultural studies approach that variously provided scope to explore the 'whole way of life' (Grossberg, Neilson and Treichler 1992:14) of the contemporary era, that explicates the workings of institutions and

social structures that mediate the experiences of individuals (Foucault 1995; 1994) and understands the relationships individuals share with each other, and challenges the institutions and social process that bind them together (Williams 2000) was central to the project. Cultural Studies, as that field of study interested in the mapping and explanation of 'the richness and complexity of human behavior' (Cohen and Manion 1986: 254) gave us a basis from which to explore ideas of identity, Self-ness and Other-ness as held by our students and seen in everyday manifestations of popular culture. It also provided the basis on which to gauge the impact of the myths we were interrogating.

Education, Social Transformation and Critical Pedagogy

By concerning ourselves with the liberatory potential that the understanding and critique of Self hold in a popular culture saturated world, we deployed a cultural studies approach as a mechanism to connect with the concerns of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy draws its intellectual and activist orientations and philosophy from a number of distinct but connected streams. The work of Paulo Freire, commencing with his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), stands as seminal in this area, whilst the more recent contributions of Giroux (1988), Kincheloe (2005), McLaren (1995), Shor (1987) and Weiler and Mitchell (1992) have further developed the central concerns expressed by Freire. These works in particular have identified locations and methods for a critical pedagogy interested in understanding and deconstructing the operations of power and social practices that maintain dominant, marginalizing views of the world and limit possibilities for the recognition of difference. For instance, Giroux's (1994) exploration of the culture industry, particularly Hollywood film, suggests that the imperative for the critique of popular culture lays in the understandings of how the imagery of popular culture both contains and excludes certain identity characteristics whilst ensuring the logic of larger social processes- for Giroux (2005), the hegemony of neo-liberalism.

One of the crucial underlying beliefs of critical pedagogy and those who see teaching as something more than the reproduction of existing social relations is that a socially transformative education requires authentic knowledge of and connection with the experiences, histories and hopes of those who inhabit the margins. By this we suggest that educators must give voice to those whose stories are typically unheard while at the same time opening for critique the dominant hegemonic narratives that would continue the silencing process. By opening for interrogation the cultural productions of popular culture, an understanding of the dominance the 'politics of representation' (Hickey and Austin 2005) maintain in privileging and marginalizing specific identity characteristics might commence. In our work, it is representations of race and ethnicity, gender and class specifically from popular culture that function as active mediators of identity that are far from neutral and meaningless.

Also attendant upon this particular philosophical orientation is a view of professional education practice that aims to disrupt the taken-for-granted assumptions about the teaching–learning relationship, in effect to 'practice what it preaches'. By taking account of the hegemonising influence popular culture holds, critical education challenges dominant representations of identity and opens a space for the consideration of difference. From our perspective, socially transformative education mandates a consideration of the positioning that occurs within the social dynamic, one that provokes the conscientisation necessary to understand the power of dominant representations of identity as they appear in the classroom. As Maher and Ward (2002) note:

> We want to foster educational settings that reflect and promote the shared and distinct understandings of people from varied backgrounds (110)

One way to trigger a critical pedagogical recognition of difference, it seemed to us, is through a rigorous and systematic dismantling of the broad processes of socialisation. In particular, we felt that interrogating those processes that support structures of inequality, oppression and exploitation based largely on the marginalization or privileging of certain racial and ethnic attributes, gender traits or class positions (as achieved largely through the imagery popular culture feeds to us- an imagery that maintains dominant representations of the axes of identity and pathologises others) would generate the discomfit necessary to stimulate the desire for social change on the part of our students. A genuinely critical pedagogy would also illuminate the roles of complicity that those not on the margins perform. That is, it seeks to examine the Self as much as the Other. What follows is a report of our experiences in working with our students to uncover the operations of dominant representations of identity as uncovered through their own critical reflexivity.

The Project

Philosophy

The approach we've taken for the exploration of identity with our students has been through the deployment of 'generative themes' that work as

prompts for the critical deconstruction of social assumptions bound up in the axes of identity. We apply Ira Shor's (1980) application of this Freirean concept and suggest that, through personalized accounts of dealing with instances of dominant popular cultural representations, openings for critical reflection occur. What this means is that we ask our students to consider their own experiences, utilizing a 'memory work' approach drawn from larger autoethnographic concerns (Weiler and Mitchell 1992; Hickey and Austin 2007) from which historicized accountings of these experiences are considered as part of larger social archetypes. It is from these accounts of Self that dominant imagery drawn from popular culture is problematised in order to arrive at a 'historicized' understanding of self.

Our aim is to intentionally confound our students' thinking with an exploration of the paradoxes of popular culture whilst opening for critique the mundane experiences of everyday life- to prompt a 'moment of bafflement' (Spivak,1990). By means of this 're-experiencing of the ordinary' (Shor: 1987) and an intentional critical excavation of ordinary social practices our students are offered a conceptual space to consider the constructedness and imperatives of power that are bound up in everyday things.

We ask our students to locate themselves 'outside' of the spatialised and mediated contexts that formulate their identities in order to critique them. Via processes of autoethnographic reflexivity and 'self-critique', an inward turn and reconsideration of seemingly 'ordinary' conditions of existence open a space for the problematizing of the identity positions our student's hold. This is a method that provides for "critical intervention in social, political and cultural life" (Jones 2005: 763-764), and one that allows for "a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts" (Spry 2001: 710). To us, a critical practice developed out of such an autoethnographic exploration of self is one way of opening possibilities for conscientisation (Hickey and Austin 2007; Austin and Hickey 2007).

Process

This project has been in process for in excess of three years to date, and has involved several hundred undergraduate teacher education students. The essential purpose of the project has been to explore the impact of Self-focused, professional identity research on people intending to teach via the explication of popular cultural 'structures of domination' (Giroux 2001). In standard ethnographic terms, there are no principal investigators per se, with our student participants as actively involved in the excavation of evidence as we are as researchers. Given that our role in this dialogic process is to operate as both

provocateurs of popular-cultural generative themes and mentors in the methodological application of the autoethnographic approach, both we and our students are actively implicated in the research process. In this way we take heed of some of the concerns Denzin and Lincoln (2005) highlight as being hallmark features of 8th and 9th 'moment' qualitative research, where '…multivoiced texts, cultural criticism, and new experimental works will become more common' (26).

Apart from utilizing the approach and methods as described above, this project, commenced with a small seeding grant from the University of Southern Queensland, , has also involved the use of extensive participant observation, learning conversations (Thomas & Hari-Augstein, 1985), open-ended survey questionnaires, various forms of visual data gathering (primarily still photographic and video recording) and the collection of documentary and realia forms of evidence in conjunction with autoethnographic elicitation of Self-ness. In particular, we have actively discussed the research process with our student participants in order to gain an understanding of how this process works from their point of view. We have similarly utilized the capture of a record of the research process with videorecordings and still photographic images of the discussions and processes we engaged as researchers and participants.

All such verbal data (interviews and learning conversations) derived from these discussions were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed using Poland's (1995) transcription protocols and accuracy checks. Analysis of the evidence has been organised around Dey's (1993) five stages for qualitative data analysis with coding and associated categorisation of all data, including visual forms, conducted using NVivo 7 software (QSR International, 2006).

What the Students Tell Us

We began early on in the process by asking students to complete a survey questionnaire of open ended questions. These questions were intended as provocative generative themes and asked for student opinion about ideas of race and ethnicity, and contained questions dealing with various myths that circulate as cultural stereotypes of race and ethnicity. For instance, one question, related to a widely circulated myth of Indigenous Australians' access to government funding was applied:

Question 6. Recently I heard a story from someone who mentioned that they know some Indigenous Australians who received an interest free loan to buy a house and received a new Toyota four wheel drive car with tax payer's money. What do you think of this?

We broadly saw 3 categories of response to this question. One response, held by 58 % of the respondents within the current student cohort (n= 130) takes the question on face value and affirms the myth. The following comments are typical of this category of response:

> It's wrong because you should not be given special benefits based on the lifestyle you choose to live and the colour of your skin (Blake 4th March 2008).

> I think aboriginals should have to earn everything that they receive just like white people (Sammy 5th March 2008)

> I think there should be a limit on how much [government] help they receive…I have to work to earn money for college they can at least work for their belongings as well (Cathy 4th March 2008).

The second category of response shows a speculation about the validity of the question, but didn't work to uncover why the myth exists. This category of respondents accounted for 34% of responses and is typified by the following responses:

> I think from the information given, yes, this seems very unfair. But also the person who provided the information may have left out certain details- maybe crucial ones- that could alter how people judge these aboriginals and their circumstances (Sarah 6th March 2008)

> My opinion is varied as there may be other facts that we don't know about. However aboriginals are singled out through representations as being 'less fortunate', when you have westerners who maybe just as unfortunate. (Alex 6th March 2008)

> Very unlikely. But if they somehow did, good on them- I wish I could get that. (Peter 4th March 2008).

A final category, represented by the fewest responses (8%), actively challenges the assumptions presented by the question. Responses typical of this category include:

> Myth! (Jackie 4th March 2008)

> It's a story. There is no proof that this is the case. (Jackson 4th March 2008).

From the deployment of this initial consciousness raising device, we launch our students into an auto-ethnographic project that runs for several weeks and asks them to account for the impact of the axes of identity on their lives. Generative themes drawn from 'memory work' are used as sources for deconstruction. It is out of these memories that we ask our students to undertake critical analytical work to uncover the operations of their privilege or marginalization as they now come to understand it in terms of larger representations of race and ethnicity as drawn on from popular culture. During this process, the students are also asked to critique dominant ideas of the axes of identity- for example, how the legacies of European colonialism still play out in terms of inequitable social standards for indigenous peoples as represented in news and current affairs reports.

For instance, during mid-2007, a rash of news reports detailing the experiences of violence in the central New South Wales town of Dubbo identified the main offenders to be young indigenous males. We asked our students to work through the 'politics of representation' at work here to account for the way race and ethnicity were used as key identifiers of these young men and the way the reports drew symbolically on 'white' fear of things 'black'. Initially, it was difficult for our students to separate 'blackness' from criminality- assumptions that these crimes were 'black crimes' and represented what young indigenous men 'do' dominated our discussions. Several students' relayed impassioned stories that they had heard- stories that were largely urban myth but added extra depth to the racial implications of the media reporting of the issue. One student in a discussion group looking at the Dubbo experience noted:

> I have a friend who was attacked by a group of Aboriginal men and was put in hospital. She said that they had attacked her because she was 'white' (Ally, Sept 2007)

While not in any way excusing violence and the criminal actions that emerged from this student's story, it emerged as further detail was filled in by the student in the discussion following that the attack was also perpetrated by 'a couple of white guys'. However, in the student's original telling of the story, it was clearly 'black men' beating up a 'white woman'- a piece of constructed urban myth that connected closely with themes from the associated media reports and larger cultural legacies concerning race in Australia.

This discussion session essentially concluded with the students' coming to terms with a realisation that what was actually at the core of the problems in Dubbo was an issue of violence and criminal behaviour- not race. The students' began to then question how race was used in formal media reports and subsequent urban myth to embody the pathologised characteristics of the stories; on a cultural level it

was race as 'blackness', and not the violent behaviour of those who launched these crimes, that became what we were concerned about and what we connected to the Dubbo experience. It was subsequently also interesting to hear the students talk about 'whiteness' as that necessary opposite of the problems 'blackness' was assumed to hold in the Dubbo example.

We find that many of our students are confounded by this type of thinking. Many were challenged when their long held, but rarely questioned, views about race and ethnicity were opened to critique. Some students, while connecting with and understanding the dynamics of examples such as Dubbo, had significant trouble identifying how race and ethnicity influenced *their* lives. A typical example of this conceptual block was summed up by 'Dawn', one of our student-participants who early on in an interview mentioned that she hadn't had any experiences of race and ethnicity:

> I've never had to think this way. It's good. But it's difficult. While I've often thought about how my experiences of growing up on the farm have led me to be 'seen' in a particular way, especially by city people, I haven't ever thought in depth about these things. I don't think I've had an interesting life- I don't think I have any experience of class or race. While I'm a woman and can talk about this, the other [axes of identity – race and class] I don't know about. (Dawn 2nd April 2008*).

It emerged as we worked through Dawn's experiences and selected memory work that she had indeed had experiences of race. It is clearly impossible to avoid such life experiences, but Dawn was typical of many of our participants insofar as what she had been able to avoid thus far was any raising to visibility of such experiences and the consequent acknowledgement of her own racial positioning. This, of course, is one of the privileges of whiteness.

In Dawn's case, further recall and reflection led her to understand that the racial experiences peppered throughout her life to date – as invisible to her as they had been – had in fact come to influence much of her world view. She noted that her experiences on 'the farm' were atypical to most others in the district in which she grew up. She identified as 'White' Australian, whilst the majority of the population were migrant Italian-Sicilian Australians. She also later noted that her understanding of the Italians in the district was informed by the taunts of her fellow 'white' students as school, with references to the 'mafia' and 'wogs' (a racial colloquialism used in Australia to describe people of Mediterranean descent) used regularly as she saw these terms and ideas affirmed in gossip, media reports and the 'general mindset of the town' (Dawn 2nd April 2008).

It is the opening for investigation of previously unnoticed aspects of our participants' experiences that is significant here. By exposing uninterrogated views and 'common sense' assumptions, we noted in our students a propensity to begin to challenge not only their own experiences of the axes of identity, but also the assumptions that marginalize and privilege people in wider social contexts. Part of this problematizing of social assumptions attached to the axes of identity involved asking our student- participants questions about how they see larger cultural views of race and ethnicity functioning. By exposing the experiences of Self to the dominant views carried by the media and popular culture more broadly, space for a critical, autoethnographic, accounting of Self is possible.

Cultural Studies as a Prompt for Critical Education - Critical Pedagogy of the Popular

Henry Giroux has long argued for the use of a 'pedagogy of cultural studies' (1994) that uses and re-appropriates the themes and myths of popular culture as locations for critique. What we have attempted to do in our work is apply a cultural studies approach that not only asks questions of the cultural myths presented to us by popular culture, but also moves towards an interrogation of Self. We want our students to actively question their location in culture by challenging them to account for the construction of their identity and world views attaching to those identities By picking up on things that would otherwise go unnoticed- those things encountered unthinkingly in the everyday - we believe we have opened a space in which our students could consider who they are as much as they critique what culture tells them they are or should be. The evidence that underpins such an analysis of Self isn't contained only in those spectacular, out of the ordinary things that sometimes occur, but from within everyday encounters with others, popular culture and the dominant myths of our cultural milieu.

Via this autoethnographic interrogation we have launched our students into a process of Self-critique that we argue is fundamental for any educator. The extension of this work will now be to explore how our students develop their own critical pedagogies and begin to deploy these renewed senses of Self and critical appraisal of the marginalizing and privileging influences of culture in their own classrooms.

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