What if Rationalists Wore Sombreros?

Some Transformative Possibilities for Teacher Education

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Abstract: In his poem "Six significant landscapes" Wallace Stevens invites us to contemplate the possibilities of transformation when we move beyond the perceptual and conceptual constraints of a particular world-view and 'identity'. The notion of identity as fluid not fixed is supported in the works of cultural theorists (Said, 2003) and critical pedagogues (Gee, 2001). Teacher education holds potential as a site for social and individual transformation, a process that necessarily involves interrogation of the self and identity/identities. Such transformation may be manifested in all participants in the education transaction, students and teachers. In this paper we will draw on our experiences of co-teaching a module in a pre-service teacher education course that aimed to introduce students to key concepts in gender education and the construction of identity. The combination of disciplines that we brought to this venture (educators and researchers in music and arts curriculum and generalist curriculum and pedagogics) and the subsequent negotiations, reflective dialogue, professional interchange, interpretations, constructions and re-constructions that we encountered in this process provided a forum for the interrogation of our beliefs and understandings about self, as teacher, teacher-educator, and colleague. We suggest that the playing out of our negotiations with and for students provided rich possibilities for social and personal transformation for the students enrolled in the module. The paper will provide a context for the interrogation of the nature of collaborative teaching and the potential transformative possibilities offered through inter-disciplinary collaborative teaching for both students and academic staff. This will be achieved through drawing on reflexive narrative, description and analysis of teaching and learning strategies, and student commentary.

Keywords: Collaborative Teaching, Reflexivity, Reflection, Tansformative Teaching

Rationalists, wearing square hats,
Think, in square rooms,
Looking at the floor,
Looking at the ceiling.
They confine themselves
To right-angled triangles.
If they tried rhomboids,
Cones, waving lines, ellipse –
As, for example, the ellipse of the half-moon –
Rationalists would wear sombreros
(Wallace Stevens, stanza six from Six significant landscapes).

IN HIS POEM *Six significant landscapes* Wallace Stevens invites us to contemplate the possibilities of transformation when we move beyond the perceptual and conceptual constraints of a particular world-view and identity. The notion of identity as fluid rather than fixed is supported in the work of cultural theorists (Said in Guzelimian, 2003) and critical pedagogues (Gee, 2001). Teacher education holds potential as a site for social and personal transformation, a process that necessarily involves interrogation of the self and identity/ties. Such transformation may be manifested in all participants in the education transaction, students and teachers.

In this paper we draw on our experiences of co-teaching a module in a pre-service teacher education course that aimed to introduce students to key concepts in gender education and the construction of identity. The combination of disciplines that we brought to this venture (educators and researchers in generalist curriculum and pedagogics, and music and arts curriculum respectively) and the subsequent negotiations, reflective dialogue, professional interchange, interpretations, constructions and re-constructions that we encountered in this process provided a forum for the interrogation of our beliefs and understandings about self, as teacher, teacher-educator, and colleague. We suggest that the playing out of our negotiations with and for students provided rich possibilities for social and personal transformation for self and students enrolled in the module.

Prelude

MM:I had a personal view that this (student awareness of gender issues in educational contexts) was a serious concern. I had covered it very, very briefly in one of the third year lectures but one lecture on gender, considering how big an issue it is, is not enough. I wanted people to explore what it meant for them as

people, what it meant for them as practitioners and what it meant for them interacting with children and how they mould children's gendered identities.

One person on their own could have done it, however, I knew from having had discussions with you over various times that you had some interesting views on gender, particularly coming from your arts background, and I approached you and said, 'Would you be interested …?'

MB: I can remember we had lots of talk about that and, for me, it was a completely different subject matter to anything that I had taught before because it had always been music or dance – some version of the arts up to that point in time and I leapt at it as an opportunity to be seen as something more than Mrs Music or Mrs Arts. I saw it as a chance to work with students in a different type of content – one which I didn't think I had too much of an official educational background with but had read an enormous amount of feminist literature and developed a particular perspective.

MM: Which was a concern I actually had because I knew you had that, if you like, more current reading than I had. I am a product of the 70's. My bra got burned a long time ago. I remember our fight was more to do with equity and being able to access opportunity …

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Collaborative Teaching

We suggest that collaborative teaching is distinguished from 'team teaching' not only by its structural characteristics, but also through its potential to challenge and re-frame identity (Russell & Munby, 1991). To address the first of these claims team-teaching tends to be paired with co-operative learning. The former is the province of the teacher/s, the latter that of the student. In these views team teaching is a process of working in parallel from a shared viewpoint – often in separate classrooms implementing shared plans and material with subsequent consultation. Alternatively, team teaching is characterised as that teaching where teachers 'take turns' teaching to decrease individual and joint workloads. It is rare for that teaching to be played out together, to be constructed in action together (Rose in Connelly and Clandinin, 1999, 50 – 51). We define collaborative teaching as individual and joint reflection-

in-action and on-action (Schön, 1990) where that action is undertaken jointly. Such a view of collaborative teaching opens up possibilities for mutual and individual learning and identity work for the teacher. As John-Steiner reminds us 'In collaborative work we learn from each other by teaching what we know; we engage in mutual appropriation'. She goes on to state that 'Solo practices are insufficient to meet the challenges and the new complexities of classrooms, parenting, and the changing workplace' (2000, 3-4), emphasising the need to consider the possibilities of collaboration in a range of learning contexts.

A noticeable absence in the index of the 4th edition of The *Handbook of Research in Teaching and Learning*, (Richardson, 2001) is any reference to the notion of 'collaborative teaching'. This absence was further evidenced in a literature search using Academic Search Premier: whilst there were 75 listings for collaborative teaching, only one referred to higher education (Duchard, Marlow, Inman, Christiansen & Reeves, 1999). By contrast there were 235 for team teaching in higher education. When using ERIC, there were no listings for collaborative, co-operative or team teaching in higher education. Whilst collaborative learning has become a common term and 'practice' in the research and teaching literature, that of collaborative teaching seems less common. Terms such as 'team teaching' could be viewed as synonymous, and though a plethora of references were found for the school sector, there were none for the higher education sector. For example, recent work on CoTeaching (Roth & Tobin, 2005) focuses on instances of teachers teaching together and learning together. However, those practices described are located primarily in school settings.

This lacunae was lived out in our experience in the university SETL (Student Evaluation of Teaching and Learning) process whereby the administration appeared unable to acknowledge, comprehend or develop an evaluation process for instance in which two academics could embark on an equal partnership of collaborative teaching. The SETL system would only acknowledge one academic in all correspondence, development of evaluation forms and subsequent analysis and reporting.

Context of the Collaborative Teaching Experience

Our collaboration was played out over successive iterations of a seven week module which was offered as a 3rd year elective in the Bachelor of Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania during the period 1999-2002. The collaboration was based on a shared personal interest in gender studies; a concern that issues we believed

important were not being addressed or reflected upon in sufficient depth by the students in other aspects of their course; a conscious choice to deliver the unit in a collaborative teaching mode which we knew would challenge us as teachers (and as learners) and our students; and a desire to engage our students at higher levels of reflection by encouraging them to go beyond the comfortable (and often disengaged) discussions of gender, to make the familiar strange, and we hoped to make the strange familiar.

Our module aim evolved over the four iterations of the course from a primary focus on concerns of gender equity in teaching and learning, to a critical reflection of what was understood by gender and finally to an interrogation of the ways in which identity is constructed by the child and adolescent. These iterations reflected an overall change in the direction of the Education 3 course from an educational psychology and special needs focus to a course structured on the development of the child in all facets; social, physical, intellectual and personal; and our own growth as colleagues working and learning together in a collaborative teaching context.

The content of the module reflected those changes. Initially we were concerned with definitions of gender, and ways of understanding the different concerns of access, equity and critical reflection. Learning experiences included school visits where students worked in teams to observe children and teachers in the classroom and playground; identify ways in which gendered roles were played out in a classroom context and consider our roles as teachers to ensure all children were treated equitably. In further work, the construction of gender by the media, family, school, society and self was considered and an expedition to the local toy shops (a highlight of the module) provided an opportunity for students to examine the familiar, and critically assess and evaluate this in the light of their developing understandings.

> MM…it was sitting in the school classroom that they actually did some timing and they began to realise just what was going on. They began to observe that in the early ages, in Kinder. There were times when they didn't know if the children in front of them were little boys or little girls. They all wore overalls or jeans or longs or tracksuits and they all had short hair and there was no difference. But by grade 3, they began to pick up that these children were separating into groups in the classroom – that the boys and girls didn't sit together; they noticed that the little girls began to wear butterfly clips in their hair; the ribbons had appeared. The girls didn't have anything to do with boys because you get 'boy germs'. You know, all of those things that the literature is replete with and yet

though they had been in classrooms, they hadn't seen it until we drew their attention to it.

Initially, the assessment was comprised of the collaborative development of a poster exploring how a particular age group defined and was defined through gender, and an individual evaluation of an educational website or electronic resource such as a CD in terms of the portrayal of gendered roles.

As the module evolved our concerns that gender is only one aspect of identity became paramount. We had observed in the assignment presentations that the frames of culture, ethnicity and class had not been included. In simultaneous developments through course re-structuring the time allocated to the modules was reduced resulting in the curtailment of the school visit. As the total unit focus in which this module was located was child development, a decision was made in 2002 to focus on the construction of identity. Gender was still a component, but now the issues of class and ethnicity were included. In other developments a whole session was devoted to the construction of identity in the media involving critical analysis of advertisements in popular magazines and films designed specifically for the child market. The collaborative poster assignment was retained, but now the intersecting factors of gender, class and ethnicity had to be addressed.

Collaborative Teaching & Learning

Team teaching is a planning and reflective process. For us collaborative teaching not only encompassed planning and reflection it also encompassed joint construction in-action and reflection on action: a dramatic, and dynamic process.

This collaboration involved inquiry into our teaching, our understanding of the 'content', our transformation of the content, and our own understandings of ourselves as teachers in that frame. We were required to work simultaneously in a supportive, facilitative and informative role (Pugach & Johnson, 2002) with each other and with our learners. We had to:

1. Co-construct the content
2. Co-construct the learning experience (for the learners and ourselves)
3. Share our values through co-constructed reflection and evaluation
4. Share the time and space in the classroom
5. Take risks in a public forum with learners and a colleague
6. Be prepared to be challenged in public by that colleague and the learners and
7. Model how learners could work together in a safe environment where ideas were open to challenge and discussion.

Risk-taking was a key component of this collaborative teaching process, a feature of collaboration remarked upon by psychologist Howard Gruber: 'What a collaboration does for you is, by spreading the risk a little bit, it encourages you to take more chances' (in John-Steiner, 2000, 19).

Outcomes of the Collaboration

Students and teachers experienced positives and challenges. For the students they were party and witnesses to a practical demonstration of team and collaborative teaching.

> MB:I think we actually wanted them to witness it. Yes, experience it but I want to differentiate between them experiencing collaboration in their work with other students – colleagues, and actually witnessing collaboration happening at a higher educational level – collaboration between two tertiary academics and the give and the take and the risk taking that happens in front of a class when you go in with a framework but enough of a willingness to let things go.

The students experienced a safe context in which to explore the familiar when we had made it strange and as a consequence build up a tolerance for ambiguity (being able to hold several ideas in conflict simultaneously) and move away from unquestioned certainty. For us there was a space to be different; to learn new ways of teaching, to provide support for each other as we explored our own certainties and ambiguities and to learn to trust each other and ourselves in a public context.

However, for some the experience was uncomfortable. Some students experienced difficulty in coping with the challenges and ambiguities of the content and learning experiences, with the invitation to self reflection and the examination of how their own identity had been constructed. For some the experience of coping with two teachers working together in the same space at the same time, openly discussing personal and professional values, was challenging. Finally, some students were resentful when we 'ruined' their favourite videos and films by providing alternative and critical readings of the characterisation and content of these.

> MB:Sophie Dahl is the one that gets them all going. The other image is the one of the American advertisement for Bacardi rum cooler and if you remember it is a Latino woman; fairly provocatively dressed and also provocatively tracing a wet finger down her cleavage and licking her tongue. At the same time – I can't remember the caption but it was something like,

'Why don't you try it with me?' It is a fairly extraordinary advertisement which I got out of a mainstream women's magazine – something like American Home and Garden. Along with the recipe for pumpkin pie, whip a page over and there it is – Bacardi rum cooler advertisement. And the same with the Sophie Dahl. It was in Harper's Bazaar or Vogue. It was in a whole raft of fashion magazines. The important place to get them … was to a position where they realised that they didn't have to react with shock, horror or approval or anything. It was just – this is an image you see every day and you probably just flick over it. Now we are going to take a closer look at it. What do you see when you look more closely and how does it make you feel? You don't need to tell me. But it was allowing them to understand that they didn't actually have to arrive at a good/bad judgement.

For us, as teachers, we were never sure how the class would react. We had clear differences in our teaching styles, our uses of humour, and our decisions concerning when to challenge and how far and when to hold back. Further challenges were evident in dealing with material beyond each teacher's initial expertise and experience, the constraints of a limited time frame when we knew each learner needed different time frames, the tensions between our desire to collaborate and a university system which did not (at that time) foster collaboration.

As the focus of the module became identity, the positives and negatives became magnified. Michele got outed as a feminist, Margaret got to be something other than the music teacher and the learners began to engage with the realities of a statement such as "I want the best that you can be whoever you are". The module was evolving as the two teachers had evolved through their collaboration.

> MB:…by that last one, we were looking at the whole of identity as it is constructed through gender; through race; through ethnicity; through religious affiliation; through your work life. And in that process it was more problematic for the students because they couldn't just sit there and say, 'Oh well, I am a girl so I think this', or 'I am a boy so I think this.' They had to think – I am a girl and I am middle class – oh and yes, I am a mother– they had to start unpacking how they stood in relation to a whole range of different things and I think that is why the last iteration was very unsettling for them because it didn't just go – scratch, gender, am I a boy or girl – oh, yes, I am a girl or a boy and I might have changed my views of the other one a little bit. They realised how complex this was and

that challenged their own views. It challenged their whole sense of self and I think they found that very unsettling. It also challenged our whole sense of self and I suspect we both found it quite unsettling but we also both enjoyed it immensely. I enjoyed it.

Conclusion

Our experience of collaborative teaching in higher education allowed us to expand our horizons of what is possible for students and teachers, to take risks, to re-consider our identities as academics, as well as prompt student reflection on these issues. However, in a world measured by rationalists its use is one which involves a willingness to interrogate and 'rationalise' its value to learners and academic staff; a willingness to participate in a context which uses the rhetoric of acceptance and encouragement, but provides little in the way of recognition and reward.

Our paper began with Wallace Stevens' poem. Two questions sitting beneath this experience of two teachers collaborating are "How do teachers confine themselves?" "How often does the rationalist perspective overrule our potential?" Two teachers, one with strong rationalist tendencies, learnt to dance in an ellipses of teaching and learning where the unknown was OK. The outcomes of this experience for the two teachers were transformative. By learning about each other, we learnt more about ourselves which is what we wanted our learners to experience.

Were the students transformed? Well some picked up a small sombrero and tentatively put it on; some danced around it interested, tempted, but unsure; some tried it on briefly but found the experience too disquieting; some refused to even look at it; and some picked up the sombrero and danced.

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