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Furlong, Mark and Mansell Lees, Virginia 2006, Who, and what, is odd here? De-naturalizing students' experiences of 'the other', *International journal of diversity in organisations, communities and nations*, vol. 5, no. 6, pp. 147-156.

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Who, and what, is odd here?

De-naturalizing Students' Experiences of "the other"

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Abstract: This paper reviews a teaching process that aimed to prepare final year social work students for critical practice with diverse and marginalized populations. Alongside lecture input, in small group discussions and in the two sequenced written assignments students were encouraged to personalize questions of bias and stigma by recalling both their experiences of being "other-ed" as well as their participation in practices that "other-ed", such as racist and homophobic imaging and acting. Feedback to the unit's first iteration in 2004 was generally positive yet a significant minority of students were clearly dissatisfied. Whilst retaining the same formal content in 2005, greater attention was devoted to generating a supportive group process and a positive environment for "negative" self-disclosure. This milieu acted to contain and normalize the students' struggle with internalized stereotypes, a stage associated with their greater preparedness to identify and challenge their own personal, cultural and ideological locations. Within the context of the unit remaining explicit about its value stance, by adopting an approach to the teaching / learning process that neither collided nor colluded we believe the 2005 revision better achieved the units aims. First, the unit received broader positive appraisal from students and, second, it appeared that the unit more firmly promoted the prospects for students carrying forward a capacity for critical self review post graduation.

Keywords: Diversity, Social Work, Social Work - Teaching, Diverse and Marginalized Populations

Introduction

“DIVERSITY” HAS BECOME a buzz word, a Pollyanna term that has achieved an almost totemic status. Even amongst those with an avowedly conservative social agenda, such as the Australian Prime Minister John Howard and George W. Bush, it is now customary to espouse, nay valorize, the importance of diversity: ‘Diversity is one of America's greatest strengths’ (White House, 2003), or US ‘President Bush's cabinet is much more substantive and diverse than ... former President Clinton's’ (www.aenvironment.com/PresidentBush ; 2005). Yet, like the claims these men make to being sensible, or even ‘innovative’ environmentalists, such avowals of their allegiance to diversity are, at best, trite. Of course, there is a suburbanized moment to cultural plurality that we all like to befriend. In this companionship we can be satisfied with our open-mindedness, an urbanity that is witnessed by our genuine appreciation of ethnic parades of tourist-friendly costume, our taken-for-granted appropriation of foreign cuisines, our knowing sophistication as we rehearse pithy, highly textured Yiddish words.

Yet, beyond shows of ethnic difference there is a richer and radically more provocative aspect to diversity. In this off-camera contestation the engines of difference and differentiation are sparked by contradictions of class and sexuality, by the flint-like

quality of religious and geographical distinctiveness, by the friction between out-groups who take identity and pride from their oppositionality to rival groups as well as to the mainstream. Here, the domesticated gaze of culture with a large “C” is disrupted: “difference” is not necessarily nice and it is not always for popular consumption.

Moreover, if we allow a tame view of diversity to preside there is a radically lessened capacity to acknowledge the role social difference plays in maldistributing social outcomes. Along with other theorists and researchers who take a critical stance, Bourdieu (1986) has argued that key aspects of social differentiation relate to established patterns in how forms of capital are defined and practiced. Certainly, access to financial capital is important as is the availability of practical networks. Yet, there exist other, more opaque forms of capital. These include an individual's manners, aesthetic judgments and tone of speech, the degree of confidence with which the self is presented, the depth of self-entitlement that is present, and so forth. Such variables relate to an individual's ‘cultural capital’, a measure that is linked to the fact that social identities are differentially valued in our supposedly open, modern communities. Where each group is meant to find acceptance on their own terms, inequalities of probability are regularly encountered. As Gilroy (2000) has observed ‘identity is destiny.’ Thus, whether a person's



prospects are indexed to health, employment, income, place of residence, ethnicity or education, outcomes do not conform to a normal distribution. In such ways difference is not just a show; it is an agent of fortune.

Although explicitly based upon a critical position, the current paper does not set out to detail or extend theoretical or empirical accounts of diversity. Rather, the aim of our paper is to offer a practical example of how a contesting engagement with the notion of diversity informed a teaching practice in a specific site, one that was compromised by resource and design conditions. This practice concerned “delivering” a six week unit – ‘Diversity and Social Work Practice’ – in the second semester of the final year of a four year social work program. This unit comprised three hours of lectures and one hour of facilitated, small group interaction.

In what follows we wish to draw attention to a set of innovative, and necessarily contentious, practical steps that were employed to set-up a teaching-learning process that was designed to enliven, rather than tame, the theme of difference and to bring this theme into a dialogue with how student’s understood “the other.” Rather than pursue the conventional aim of students attaining a purported “cultural competence”, that is of collecting and internalizing normalizing truth claims about different kinds of other-ness, about the “them”, we wished to have students be more curious and critical about themselves and their/our culture. Prior to beginning this account, it is necessary to offer a description of the features of the local site.

Developmental Stages

It is not so easy being an undergraduate social work student. As well as much that is positively received, many students feel their studies have involved a sequence of often uncomfortable experiences, not least of which is that these (mostly) young students have been persistently introduced to, and have often been re-galed by, perturbing injustices that characterize our local and global conditions. For many these encounters include being pressed by teachers, and by the professional culture within which they being socialized, to take up invitations to be ideologically contesting, practically engaged and personally reflective across all their years of study. Making this all the more difficult is that these people have to negotiate the task of symbolically entering an occupational category that is poorly valued, if not is distinctly demeaned (Valentine, 1994). This subjective process is itself made the more problematic as it is counterpointed with the student’s own need to identify, and then internalize, an initial sense of their own professional competence.

It follows that as these students approach the end of their course, and at the very time they have to fo-

cus on making a transition to the paid workforce, it is likely that they will be tiring of, and perhaps even impatient to complete, their studies. It is also likely that they will be experiencing a problematic relationship between their knowledge of what should be addressed and their sense of their own personal limitations. At exactly this point “we” teachers had the task of introducing a final course requirement, a short but intense mandatory unit on “social diversity and social work practice.” As will be elaborated later, this unit was designed to re-focus on, and to consolidate approaches to, social exclusion and stigma with a specific attention being given to racism and homophobia which were to be used as “case studies” within the subject. To undertake the writing as well as the teaching a small group of staff were drawn from La Trobe University’s three Victorian campus locations – Bendigo, Wodonga and Bundoora. Individual staff members took up the challenge to research and write the segment that held most interest to them and then this material was shared so that the same content was delivered across each campus. This is a departure to the usual practice where unit outlines are common whilst content reflects the individual teacher’s take on the material.

With an emphasis on the second year of this subject’s delivery, the following offers a brief account of how this unit was delivered and received. We believe that we have been able to identify an energizing and (reasonably) novel approach, one that is able to evoke, or perhaps re-invoke, a degree of adventure for students. In what follows a brief outline of the course structure and the pedagogical principles employed is offered prior to a documentation of the context within which the subject is delivered. Details of the teaching / learning process that specified the program is then set out prior to a concluding commentary.

The Course Structure

The subject was organized as a six week block with 3 hours of lectures and a one hour seminar each week. Because of this brevity the decision was made to focus on three examples, three “case studies”, i.e. sexual diversity, indigenous issues and immigration in weeks 2, 3 and 4 with each of these weeks featuring a guest presenter. These examples were situated within an explicitly critical framework, one that determinedly attended to social exclusion, stigma and anti-oppressive practice. The conceptual stance was introduced in week 1 which presented an “in-house” overview. Week 5 was designed to emphasize practice questions and was presented by a guest practitioner. Week 6 was designed to further develop the material and offer a conclusion. Thus, the sequence was: ‘Introductions and Overview’; ‘Indigenous is-

sues', 'Culture and Migration'; 'Sexuality/ies'; 'Working with difficult differences'; 'Appreciating not Depreciating Differences.' In each of the six weeks there were set readings available electronically. Further details are available directly from the authors.

The Pedagogical Starting Point

As discussed above, students close to the completion of their program of studies are likely to be feeling "tired." Nonetheless these adult learners can be recognized as "senior" a student, that is as reflective and learned adults with much to offer and much to build on. Given this starting point a question arises: what approach, what set of pedagogical principles, could offer the best chance of a unit, one that is necessarily based on a lecture format and which has a high ideological quotient, might gain the greatest experiential purchase and momentum?; how could this unit, having as its flag the less than catchy title "Diversity and Social Work Practice", be positioned to generate a degree of vivacity? Yes, the language used is that subjects are "delivered" but we all know that message sent is not necessarily message received. Three pedagogical principles were at the base of our approach and each is discussed below.

Normalizing Bias and Prejudice (without condoning either)

If we were to take seriously the idea that our participants are wearing a little thin, yet are also senior students with significant knowledge and skills, it makes sense *not* to offer a predominately theoretical, abstract program as such an approach neither animates those who are feeling tired and flat nor acknowledges their strengths. Rather, we decided to put an emphasis on their personal experience of racism and homophobia by assuming racism and homophobia are themes in everybody's 'lived experience' (Schutz, 1972). The starting task then becomes articulating these experiences – but perhaps doing this in a somewhat different kind of way. The usual configuration is that students are expected to expose themselves, to show "us" who take up the role of teacher and judge with respect to "them" as students, who are appraised as more or less deviant. Rather, as teachers, as practitioners and as people we thought it may be useful if we also talked about our experiences of racism and homophobia.

Getting some purchase on the local and the personal makes sense as the great majority of senior students know how to write essays, which for many have become tasks that can be turned out as straightforward technical exercises however time consuming this may be. Also, by the final year of a four year program, these folk know what they are

expected to espouse. So, if we wished to offer the best conditions within which students might personalize our subject matter, if we were to get away from rote espousals of social-work speak, if we wished to perturb the pattern of students putting up an easy avowal of having the right attitude – the "some of my best friends are gay" kind of ward-off – as a first step it made sense to normalize racism and homophobia. Specifically, towards the goal of engaging students into a deepening of their capacity to practice the disciplines of self-knowledge and self-criticism, we endeavoured to set up a milieu that normalised – but did not condone – bias and prejudice, a nuanced environment that "neither colluded not collided" (Furlong, 2001). This involved starting with the overt and repeated premise that "you and I, each of us, is sexist, age-ist, class-ist, etc. – as well as racist and homophobic."

One option was to – once again – tell students what they are meant to think. And, although we had only one hour of small groups and three hours a week of large group teaching, which was clearly not what one would have wanted if one was in control of resourcing and design, we did not want to – in the colloquial sense – let these large group times degenerate into "lecturing", let alone hectoring, students. We knew that this had been the experience of many students previously and we wished to achieve a different tone. As a matter of course over the two, or four, years of the B.S.W. program students had been regularly exhorted to recognize, and to be ready to act in relation to, social injustice. And, one imagines, this had occurred both legitimately and persistently – yet we did not want to duplicate this 'big jugs and little mugs' pedagogy (Martin, 1996). Rather, we wanted the students own experience to be recognized and affirmed as the concrete site for their own investigations – and to do this in groups. "Your own experience, for example as a blamer and as someone who has been blamed, is the data we want you, and the group, to examine." Inga Clendinnen (2005) has noted that 'exhortation without example isn't much use.' If we could have people see themselves as their own example, we knew that this could be both exciting and profitable. If this could become the accepted "tone", if it led to at least a partial suspension of disbelief, we thought that the work could be experienced as stimulating rather than draining, as enlivening rather than as aversive.

Although it was always our 'espoused theory' (Argyris and Schon, 1976), after the first year of delivery we came more vividly to the position that it was important to generate a milieu within which it was both safe and expected that participants acknowledge their prejudices whilst making it clear that this is not to condone such practices. Of course, there are risks and dilemmas in our approach and

attention will be given to these in the concluding discussion. For now, the second of our teaching-learning principles will be described.

The Service User is the Expert: Rejecting the Competency Approach to “Other-ness”

There is a considerable literature examining, and a weighty set of injunctions advocating, a ‘competency approach’ to practice with people from diverse communities. Although thought relevant to any group included within the umbrella term ‘diversity’, such as the mentally ill or those with non-mainstream faiths (Hodge, 2004), the notion of practice “competency” is particularly prominent with respect to ethnicity / culture (Cross, 1999.; Fitzgerald, 1996; Galambos, 2003; Weaver, 2005). Informed by the post-colonial tradition (Said, 1978; Gilroy, 2000), we took the opposite position. Our premise was that there is no objective and universal knowledge that can totalize any group or individual person. Thus, there is no minimum set, no core curriculum, of neutral data that practitioners, or indeed researchers, might have access to, or may claim possession of, that can entitle these people to take up the qualification “competent” let alone that of “expert.”

Following Dean (2001) we wished to positively celebrate a lack of competence as integral to the prospects of gaining an understanding of other-ness:

With “lack of competence” as the focus, a different view of practicing across cultures emerges. The client is the “expert” and the practitioner / clinician is in a position of seeking knowledge and trying to understand what like is life for the specific person who is their client. There is no thought of competence p instead one thinks of gaining understanding (always partial) of a phenomena that is evolving and changing (Dean, 2004; 624).

If one assumes that all groups tend to have a culture, what might be called culture with a small “c”, the same argument can be seen to apply, that is whether the group is defined with respect to disability or sexuality, class or gender, and so forth, it is preferable to remain not knowing and curious rather than to assume a position of expertise. As Keenan (2004; 541) notes ‘a stance of informed not-knowing (can) mitigate against essentialism and stereotyping.’

Thus, we took the view that “diversity and social work practice” should not be based on some kind of abstracted “other-ology”, that it should not be about students being encouraged to aspire to become mini-experts on “them” – whoever the “them” is in a particular case. In opposition to the liberal canon, that imperializing tradition that has produced such classic texts as Waddy’s (1991) ‘The Muslim Mind’ or Al-

bert Ellis’ (1965) text on ‘oversexed’ women, we *do assume* a ‘client can objectively perceive and present their own culture’ (Cox, 1989; 249).

The Other as Mirror

The notion that the service user is the expert on their culture and, more specifically and importantly, on their relationship with this culture, brings into focus the third pedagogical principle: if I am *not* trying to objectify and categorize the other, if I remain curious and try to understand their particularity rather than their commonality, it is their difference that is the condition that enables me to see myself and my location more clearly. Rather than assuming it is the other who is odd, different, interesting, deviant, and so forth, it is possible to turn over one’s starting point and to reflect upon, and to experiment with, the premise it may be “us” who takes up the anomalous position (Ata and Furlong, 2005). What can make the work exciting, and which might make it personally stimulating, is to see and celebrate “the other” as a sentient and reflective entity, as a mirror: this person’s difference gives one feedback, clarifies one’s location personally, professionally, culturally, ideologically, etc. For example, people from more “collectivist” traditions offer a critique of the degenerate individualism that characterizes western ideology (Dumont, 1986; Heelas and Locke, 1981) and western approaches to practice (Al-Krenwai and Graham, 2000; Owusu-Bempah, 1999).

A reflective engagement with other-ness, with a particular example of diversity-in-play, offers a practitioner a reflective medium in relation to which one’s own actuality is made clearer. Specifically, if it is the other’s difference that is held as the independent variable, if we hold their actuality as unproblematic, as “normal”, rather than as different and noteworthy, we act to de-naturalize the cultural assumptions and embeddedness of ourselves as both practitioners and as cultural representatives. In saying this we are mindful that the practitioner may not be, and/or may not see themselves as, of the mainstream spiritually, sexually, ethnically, and so forth. Also, it is important to note that this difference, or differences, of the practitioner from the putative ‘anglo’ mainstream may be common to, or antagonistic with, the other-ness of the client. This possibility acknowledged, we would still argue that the practitioner is likely to have naturalized (much of) the anthropology – the ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1977) – associated with their *belonging* to a professional / therapeutic cadre. This *belonging* is – in and of itself – quite properly a subject for review as it is likely to obscure, even elide, much that is problematic. For example, our capacity to acknowledge our (relative) power and privilege is diminished by the culture found in the

helping professions that assumes that what we know and what we do is, at worst, benign or is, more likely, simply enlightened and progressive.

Why might students (and practitioners) find this starting point stimulating? It is potentially enlivening because it puts the student and her/his customs, her/his attitudes and habituated patterns of action and meaning, into a developmental and critical frame. Rather than trying to adjust, to work upon, the other one is engaging with one's own life course by identifying *my* feelings, actions, meanings and attitudes which, over time, creates the possibility of making distinctions between how I am now and how I may want to be in the future. Over time and with some real degree of commitment, this can introduce choice points.

The Teaching / Learning Sequence

Towards the aim of affirming, rather than attacking, what students experience and believe, we have so far sketched three principles that were active elements in producing an animating milieu for learning and reflection. Below, we introduce a sequence of classroom exercises and follow this with two developmentally sequenced written assignments that set out to identify, and then build on, this starting point.

In the Class Room

Establishing a sense of trust is a *sine qua non* for effective group work. Towards this aim it is helpful if participants engage in constructive self-disclosure: despite the risk, if one student feels it safe and appropriate to talk about being gay, that's great; if another student then feels free to identify their religion, and goes on to articulate this faith's negative attitude to homosexuality, this is even better *if* the articulation of such differences is contextualized by a group norm of respect and intimacy. Yet, such occurrences can never be the simple product of the fiat of the group leader. Such trust has to grow, has to be earned, and a sense of safety will only be felt to be real if the group attains a developmental stage that is capable of containing – neither minimizing nor dramaticising – expressions of significant differences between members.

Thus, the evolution of group confidence in the larger and the smaller groups was a key educational condition. As with all group work, small risks being worked with well leads, over time, to larger risks being possible; larger risks being positively processed leads to a deeper sense of group safety and trust. Yet, developmental phases in a group are never a matter of linear progression. It is both helpful and necessary to have incidents and difficulties, to have moments and interactions that go awry, as it is in the awkward, difficult events being constructively re-

viewed and re-worked that group cohesion and confidence is deepened. Both in the classroom and in practice, being able to discuss race and sexuality, faith and class, stigma and status, is awkward and necessarily involves being able 'to talk when the talking is tough' (Miller, Donner and Fraser, 2004). And, if this is to be done and done well, the Nike approach is never recommended: one can't "just do it."

We wished to further the capacity to name and sit with what is difficult, not just as a technical skill but as a personal commitment. How might this be promoted within the groups and in individuals? Contributing to the development of an interactive group context, one that was both supportive and challenging, we used the following three exercises over the initial weeks as a clear sequence. Although this sequence is set out in a linear manner, we should make it clear that it never actually happened this way. Like "time lapse" photography, what is depicted leaves out a complex set of moment-to-moment contingencies.

When have you felt "other-ed?"

In the small groups in week one the seminar leaders asked each student to privately identify an experience when they had felt they had been "other-ed" (Dominelli, 2002), that is an experience when the student had felt shunned and/or demeaned on the basis of their class, gender, ethnicity, etc. The students were then randomly paired up and asked to informally interview each other about the other's experience. Lastly, and in the "large" small group, each person was asked to introduce the person with whom they had been talking. The proposed sequence of the exercise was signalled to the group prior to its commencement and each student was told not to expose themselves more than was commensurate with the larger (small) knowing about them.

This exercise acted to "jump start" an engagement with the themes of the subject. Although there was reportedly some variation from one group to the next, the level of daring, of active self-disclosure, involved appeared to create sufficient immediacy and intensity for the group to have the experience that our project was not going to be a reprising of what had come before in their other subjects. This was personal, the exercise was not about text books, not about some kind of sterile facts or theorizing, that it distinct and refreshing as it took the student's own experiences as primary. For example, in the small group the first author facilitated, a review of the exercise undertaken at the conclusion of this first small group reported that – given the time that was allocated for the students to reflect upon their own life experiences – that no one had had difficulty in identifying at least one

instance where they had felt denigrated and outcast. One could be heard if one was “game” to be upfront.

When have you Stereotyped?

A parallel exercise, with similar group developmental results, was undertaken beginning in week two. This exercise took the theme of “other-ing” and stigma one step further by asking each student to identify an instance where they had initiated, or at least had participated in, an act of “other-ing”, of negatively stereotyping someone, or a group, on the basis of class, gender, ethnicity, etc. In this exercise the pressure on students to own an act that was embarrassing, even shameful, and this put each student into a position that was, at least initially, contradictory. Yes, in the lectures and in the espoused theory of the subject, it had been stated and re-stated that everyone is biased, that we are all ethno-centric, sexist and homophobic at least to some degree. Students had been told, “this is the culture, it is within and without you.” Yet, owning this personally and in the group was something else, this was an act that *good* social workers should not be associated with,

However often it had been stated that bias is endemic to humans, the actuality of declaring one’s partiality, even if it could be played as a retrospective event, created a point of tension for students. The very instance of bias that one was to identify, and then make a decision about declaring to the whole group, would not only transgress the social set of the social work program that one was a signed up part of, almost certainly it would also be an act that signalled a slight upon others in the here-and-now small group. In this group, right here, there were people who were “gay”, “Christian”, “wogs”, and so forth, that was the subjects of one’s prejudice.

Unlike the exercise undertaken in week one, in this iteration no one “reported” back to the large group about you. You had to declare it yourself if you were prepared to have your bias witnessed. Around half of the students did take this step and, even for those that did not, the obvious courage of those that did this, and the understanding the groups generally displayed about this “sin”, appeared to go some way towards normalizing, but not condoning, the fact that we are all blamers and stereotypers, villains and stone throwers. And, in the discussions that ensued, especially around those that found themselves at the victim end of these stories and who were prepared to comment about being at the rough end of such practices, there was something productive, albeit uncomfortable, that arose: within the larger group there was a wincing acknowledgment of the power and the hurt that “other-ing” produces. Consistent with the theory of group work, if these awkward and complex elements could be attended to

well, “turning points” (Gitterman and Wayne, 2004) might be created.

Speaking directly about Difficulties with Individuals from groups that have been “other-ed”

As the subject entered weeks three, four and five, particularly as students came to consider the task set in the second written exercise (see below), the intention was to introduce the possibility of practice where “difficult differences” arose. That is we wished to have students come directly to grips with the often poignant, and yet gritty, reality that it is neither possible nor appropriate to simply champion nor idealize those that had been other-ed. Rather, given there is sometimes prejudice about disability, psychiatric illness or homosexuality in some stigmatized ethnic cultures, or that they may encounter child abuse in indigenous communities, and so forth, how might they as practitioners directly acknowledge and work with such difficulties whilst still remaining aware that individuals in these groups have suffered high levels of marginalization and stigma, a reality that also should be acknowledged and in relation to which they needed to be curious, compassionate and an active advocate.

The theme of “talking when talking is tough” (Miller, Donner and Fraser, 2004) was again taken up as a motif here. We wanted to be able to find vignettes from the students’ own experience where, for example, “this wo/man, who is someone who has been the subject of (say) racism, may also be violent” or of examples where people who have been the subject of racism might “stereotype and denigrate you.” This question drew examples from students that presented clear ambiguities and contradictions: the student who worked in the judicial system with an indigenous man who had been punished in the “anglo” prison system who talked of his fear of returning to his tribal land to face the certainty that he would be ritually wounded for his transgression; the student who made clear her de-personalization, perhaps even hatred, of all professionals in the mental health field who she blamed for her brother’s death.

What can be done with these vexed presentations? Running to simplistic blaming is as useful as defaulting to pseudo-technical solutions: only the plainest cognitive psychologist, only the most naïve human service manager, could believe there are simple solutions to such complex and contradictory presentations. In these circumstances the naming of the usual suspects, like the offering up of a technical fix, is always and only but one frustration away. At exactly this point we wished to stop here, to ask each student to review where they were coming from. For us a slow engagement with this material was espe-

cially important as it *obviously* re-evokes many of the common prejudices that run rhizome-like through the ground of popular culture: when practice gets stuck, where there is an impasse, we all run to generalisations – “all Islamic people are sexist”, “men are potential rapists – one and all”; “doctors just give people pills”; “just stay away from child protection, they are the problem” (Furlong and Young, 1996).

In the Student's written Work

To deepen the engagement with the experiential and theoretical material, two written assignments were designed. The first of these was due at the completion of week four with the final piece due a week after the completion of week six. The instructions for each are quoted below along with some commentary on how students responded. (It should be noted that the first author read and marked all essays at the larger campus)

Assignment One

The task for the first essay was set out as:-

- (i) “In 1000 words identify your resources for, and constraints to, practice with persons from one of the groups studied in this subject, that is aboriginal, immigrant or lesbian / gay persons. This is expected to be a reflective exercise that considers ‘where you are coming from’ in terms of your identity and its politics, your attitudes and preferences and, in general, sets you the task of reviewing what you bring with you in your work with people from diverse backgrounds.”

Much more so in 2005 the application to, and the general standard of, this assignment was remarkable with the great majority of students entering the spirit of the exercise enthusiastically. An extremely wide series of biographical vignettes were offered, for example there were very personal accounts of bias, and of being biased; poignant stories of uncertainty and struggle around sexuality; essays of anguish and paralysis about indigenous Australians; a sustained consideration of the conflict between the perceived tenets of religious faith and being committed to being non-judgmental. Yet, however personal, however moving, were these accounts, what was assessed and directly commented on was the matter of whether the student undertook to a satisfactorily level the task that was set: was there a clear and comprehensive review and was the quality of this appraisal critically reflective and thorough? Although it was noted that for some students, really engaging with this essay was personally perturbing, may even have “stirred

up the ghosts in the nursery” as it is said, just being “personal” was not enough.

For many reasons it follows that considerable care was taken to respond thoughtfully to this written work. If a student had taken real care, if there was an engagement – however incomplete and emotionally raw this may have been – then this should be respectfully noted; even if this person had not done so well technically, and especially if they had “exposed” themselves, thoughtful feedback was in order. Sometimes this was in the form of “thinking into the next assignment, you might like to consider ...”; sometimes, this was in terms of gentle, but direct, challenge: “your analysis is, I think, less accomplished at this stage than your enthusiasm, which is clearly evident”; or, “I am not sure you have put yourself as on the line as you might of in this essay.”; or even “have you considered it is possible your faith is more patriarchal than you might be happy to acknowledge?” And, for the few students – roughly 10% at the larger campus – who did not appear to enter the fray, they were given very low or fail grades.

The Second Assignment

The second written task asked students to proceed from the personal to the practical, ie.:-

- (ii) “Building on assignment one, the task of the 1,500 word second essay is to have you develop your ideas for practice with your nominated group mindful that ‘eligibility’ for contact with social work services tends to reinforce marginalization / social inclusion. Specifically:-

- In relation to someone from one of the marginalized groups we have studied that you reflected upon in part (i)
- put forward practical ideas as to how your practice would be inclusive and empowering without this account ignoring your feelings, attitudes and habits.”

The above two pieces were designed to articulate with the thematic sequence observed in the subject.

Student and Staff Appraisal

From the Perspective of Students

As might be expected in the first year a new subject is undertaken, results were mixed in 2004. The majority of students (65-70%) reported a clearly positive response with both qualitative and quantitative indicators firm in indicating that students had experienced a reasonable degree of stimulation and learning. Attendance at lectures, which is usually a key index of

student interest, remained good. That said, a significant minority of students gave the subject a negative report. This was detailed in the qualitative feedback with statements such as “there was nothing new presented”, that the subject was “repetitive”, that it had “re-cycled” information and approaches that had been covered previously in the course. This appraisal was collated from written feedback on two distinct levels that is both “quality of teaching” and “student satisfaction / quality of learning questionnaires were administered. In reviewing this feedback it should be noted that results were compromised as formal feedback was accessed from only around 40% of the student group.

In 2005 a more rigorous protocol for accessing student feedback resulted in returns being received from 75% (77/103) of students at the larger, metropolitan campus. Analysis of this data by the Academic Development Unit presented a “very-to-extremely positive” account of the experience of students. The received qualitative data was consistent with this positive statistical picture even if this pattern varied somewhat between the seminar groups. Unlike in 2004, only half a dozen individuals indicated general reservations with the subject, including with respect to the question of repetition, that is only 8% of students indicated that the subject had failed to “deepen” their appreciation of the “causes and consequences of marginalization” and only one respondent found the unit lacked “relevance.”

From the Teachers' Perspective

From the initial planning stage in 2003, through the teaching period of 2004, it was clear that the teaching group was enthusiastic about this subject; we were revving to go even as we experienced that the students were in the mood to feel less than excited. Before commencing we expected to hear some less than enthused phrases, even some faces pulled, at the prospect of a mainly lecture based unit on diversity. “We've heard all this before” was the most likely reaction. Perhaps, we should have been mindful that in this first year the first priority is to have the “content” organized and presented.

Mindful of the student feedback, in reviewing this first year we were not happy on several counts. Firstly, we thought we had been less than dynamic and inclusive, less than adept at setting up a safe and interesting process. Secondly, we thought that it tended to be exactly those students who were “sullen”, who said “there is nothing new here”, that we had failed to find a way to effectively engage and challenge. These students tended to be conservative and were often deeply, if not overtly, Christian. As has been described, in the second year we were very pleased with the quantitative and the qualitative re-

sponse. Moreover, the non-specifics of the subject, its tone and participation level, had been far more satisfying. Whilst it may be debatable to some to see this as a positive sign, a key indicator for us was that in the written work, and also in the small groups, the level of “negative” self disclosure was far higher than in the first year. Moreover, in the sequence of the written work there was a more general quality of genuine struggle, of students identifying and working with their self declared bias and cultural embeddedness.

Conclusion

Quantitative and qualitative student appraisals supported the view that the 2005 iteration was far more successful than was the 2004 version. That said, in reviewing our work with this unit there are a range of serious qualifications and important reservations requiring consideration. Not least of these is the matter of our own relationship with the matter of “self-disclosure.” As we noted earlier, a degree of self disclosure was modelled by the teaching staff. Sometimes, this was relatively easy, for example a hetero-sexual male can say “I'm a gubba, a straight. Yet, in my own way I am, and have been for some time, more than a little bent, a bit *other*. And, I want to be clear that I am enthusiastically anti-convergence, against McDonalization.” Yet, this is obviously not always so easy if one, for instance, gay. Whilst quite formally the subject and its teachers took a deliberately and overtly pro-diversity, anti-oppression stance, we are also constrained by context: we are in a conservative university environment.

Other risks we encountered included being faced with some troubling disclosures, for example about racism and homophobia. Clearly, there is a dilemma with this and whilst we took the “neither colluding nor colliding” position, when is “some progress” not enough progress? Similarly, encouraging people to “state your bias directly” a sign of engagement and when are such expressions simply not acceptable? And, these are only several of the questions that remain. Yet, we are enthused with the work so far. Why do we feel this?

As noted earlier, the relevant research is clear that practitioners are assisted in their work with diversity by:-

- seeing the other as a mirror who reflects to us feedback about our own personal, cultural and ideological particularity, &
- having a commitment to curiosity and ‘not knowing’
- We wished to make a contribution to students achieving this kind of position. As such, our goal was not to have students try to gain an incremental addition to what they (thought they) knew

about “them.” Rather, we sought to catalyse students to be more able to discern:-

- their own outlines – to know themselves;
- the background character of “western’ orthodoxies, their defining milieu, more intimately, and
- therefore to have this background understood as problematic.

It would only be if this background and its features were brought into relief that the relationship tensions present between persons from the many groups who are bracketed within that of “the diverse” and our current ideological and the market conditions might be the more clearly and critically understood. Towards this end between the 2004 and 2005 iterations we not change our commitment to the values of critical theory and practice. Rather, by adopting an approach to the teaching / learning process that neither collided nor colluded with students, we be-

lieve we made this contesting stance one that was easier for students to engage with to embed. By attending to the importance of group process, of making sure we critically facilitated rather than hectored, we believe students became more subjectively involved which, in turn, made their “learning work” more personal, more about their contingencies than about some kind of pseudo-objective “other-ology.”

Such a turn makes their involvement more exciting and, we would argue, this improves the prospects for students carrying forward a capacity for critical self review post graduation. In so far as we were able to invite students to see that it is their self and their assumptions that benefit from being identified and interrogated that are de-naturalized, is the extent to which our own engagement with the subject became exciting. We loved working with this unit and its group of students and this degree of enjoyment is a positive indicator in and of itself.

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