

# ‘Hearing the Country’: Reflexivity as an intimate journey into epistemological liminalities



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## Abstract

When approached from a critical pedagogical perspective, Indigenous Australian Studies necessarily addresses emotionally difficult topics related to race, history, the ongoing power of colonisation and our identities as Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. In this paper I will contend that in PBL (problem-based learning) personal and emotional responses become dialogic and discursive, intellectualised and theorised, and that the resulting new awareness translates into positive thought, practical actions and change with the potential to build a more socially just Australian society for Indigenous Australian peoples. This paper explores how PBL is being used in a third year class at Monash University called ‘Hearing the Country’. It discusses how PBL is used to construct scenarios in which the students are not only exposed to forms of Indigenous knowledges but, through guided reflexive practice, become aware of their own ways of knowing themselves as individuals and how they respond to particular and sometimes confronting ways of understanding other ways of knowing Australia. PBL then provides a platform from which students experience decolonising methodologies first hand and this then may challenge their ways of knowing.

## Introduction

I discuss problem-based learning (PBL) and reflexivity in a university environment when answering the question of how we most successfully transfer knowledge about the presumed Other into our own cultural space without reducing, fragmenting, and exoticising complex knowledge systems. My goals are to stimulate in students an awareness of, and empathic engagement with, Indigenous

epistemologies and Indigenous perspectives on environment, other species, moral ecology and cultural and commercial activities undertaken on Country. I use ethnographic scenarios as learning triggers for weekly workshops to provide a multi-sensorial and experiential style of learning. The process draws on my own 32 years of experience working with the Yanyuwa peoples of the south-west Gulf of Carpentaria in the Northern Territory. Topics range from the construction of ethnoclassificatory systems to the construction of kinship as an expression of moral ontological frameworks.

Central to the success of the course is that the *li-Yanyuwa li-Wirdiwalangu* (Yanyuwa knowledge holders), the core group of senior men and women who play an active daily role in the maintenance and dissemination of Yanyuwa knowledge systems, is increasingly becoming a site of their own empowerment. In consultation with this author, they have selected and annotated core ethnographic information then developed these into PBL triggers for the course.

This paper reveals the means by which students from various disciplines at Monash University explore the relationship between themselves as reflexive learners and the knowledge systems in which they are embedded, and other knowledge systems to which the course ‘Hearing the Country’ exposes them.

In this unit, the question is posed as to whether is it possible to contextualise Indigenous ontology and epistemology into a Western classroom setting, and if so, how best can we most successfully transfer knowledge about the presumed Other into our own cultural space without reducing, fragmenting and exoticising complex knowledge systems.

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To this end, we have been privileged and fortunate that the *Yanyuwa* families are fearless in their openness and willingness to work with aspects of outside cultures in an attempt to demonstrate as much as is possible the fabric and value of their own identity and Law. They have made three award-winning films: *Two Laws* (1981), *Buwallala Akariya – Journey East* (1989), and *Ka-Wayawayama – Aeroplane Dance* (1994), and more recently a suite of seven animations incorporating narratives and song lines. They have also developed a website in collaboration with academics from Deakin University and Monash University in Melbourne, and Australian National University in Canberra; the site (<http://arts.deakin.edu.au/Diwurruwumu/>) is part of a process of self-representation and education (see Bradley, Devlin-Glass & Mackinlay, 1999). The *Yanyuwa* families developed materials with me that they consider suitable and valuable as vehicles for cross-cultural instruction. Many of them are based on real-life situations experienced both by members of the *Yanyuwa* families and myself. The material was gathered during the course of a 32-year collaboration between myself and the *Yanyuwa* families that continues to this day.

I have also had my own powerful experiences as the Other in both national and international contexts (Australia, Africa, Israel, Europe and Tibet). In the process of mentoring students into the emotional and intellectual landscapes of disorientation, bewilderment, provocation and dislocation, we draw on these experiences in a discursive manner. In doing so, we break through formal veneers surrounding the performance of the role of instructor in the university environment in a particularly intimate way. To disclose elements of the self requires the investment of a degree of trust in the students on our part. I

believe that by investing trust in the students I introduce them to a system that one of our students has called 'guided freedom'.

### Reflexivity

The students undertake a variety of assessable activities, including traditional essays situated firmly within a realm of contest between Indigenous and Western scientific knowledge systems. The essay topics act to direct and focus the understandings and discourses and personal experiences the students have developed throughout the semester. I have struggled over the appropriate assessment modes for 'Hearing the Country', given the power of the class experience and the way that assessment invokes and reinforces the very institutional constructs of which I want students to gain a critical understanding.

In response to my own unease regarding traditional assessment, I have chosen to give much attention and weight to each student's reflexive journal as I have found reflexive writings a rich and inclusive mode of engaging with students in their deep learning. Each student participates in a private dialogue (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985; Lee & Barnett, 1994) with me through weekly reflexive responses to the trigger material and set literature. Therefore, I give weight to the value of students' reflexive practice by adding it to performance evaluation. I adopt a model of awarding marks not for reflection content or structure, but for the actual submission of reflexive text on a weekly basis (e.g. Bawden, 1991; Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985; Butler, 1996; Hogan, 1995; Mezirow, 1990; Morrison, 1996; November, 1996; O'Connor, 1997; Ross, 1989; Schön, 1983 & 1992; Stockhausen & Creedy, 1994; Sykes, 1986; Walden, 1988). I present the students with a guide to reflexive writing and then we respond to their reflections individually

on a weekly basis over the course of the semester. Again, as with the PBL triggers, there is no 'right' answer in the reflexive text. I explain to students that I do not just want them to defend their intellectual interpretations of material, but that I want them to acknowledge their emotional responses as well. I stress to them that our emotions are real and we need to learn to deal with them in all of our work situations; they are, after all, a part of the real world. The conversation that develops tends then to reflect the anxieties and tensions sometimes felt by the students during the semester.

I ask students to write 500 to 1000 words per reflexive exercise, which forms the basis of reflexive journal as a part of their major assessment. However, it is more common to find students write several thousand words in response to reflections, thus demonstrating a meaningful commitment to their own self, their own journey and their own desires to engage with the world, no longer accepting the common discourses about learning, self and Other, the nature of knowledge and knowing. Instead, they explore the situated legitimacy of knowledge.

Impassioned statements and declarations are important elements of reflexive writing as they frequently flag momentous points of provocation on the journey of self-discovery. The majority of students experience such moments as they experience shifts in their understandings of the Other as much as of themselves and the world they experience. Figure 6 is reflective of the kind of cognitive dissonance many students experience when presented with the position that both Western and Indigenous knowledge systems are equally legitimate. Many students experience dilemmas when faced with a way of thinking that does not reify either Western or Indigenous knowledge. However, I propose

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that as educators, rather than mask the dilemmas individuals generally encounter when they first work with the Other, we encourage students to experience some element of those feelings before leaving the learning environment. In order to deconstruct the Other, I have to deconstruct myself, and develop an interior dialogue that forces the question: What or who is the Other?’

I cannot bring the totality of Indigenous lives, knowledge and Law into the classroom, but through the relationship established with the *Yanyuwa* families I have been able to introduce real-life scenarios that trigger the same disorientation, fear and insecurities, as well as humour and joy that most students do not experience until they work with Indigenous peoples. At that point, traditionally, the individual ‘manages’ their responses according to their own reflexive capabilities, which have often not been developed adequately, if at all. Unfortunately, they therefore invoke the position of expert acquired through their university degree rather than explore their lack of expertise in a given scenario because of the traditional notion of education. In their resulting practice, they continue to fulfil the colonial pedagogies that impose on the Other rather than the self, a form of practice we seek to challenge.

It is inevitable that the institution constructs the student as expert and that the student will perform this role in their working life. ‘Hearing the Country’ constantly challenges this position by providing a learning environment that allows students to understand that a position of ignorance is not threatening and does not necessarily imply a lack of intelligence or respect. As the mediator in this class, I am constantly learning from the students as well, as many of their questions asked in ignorance are actually profound. They tend to generate animated conversation and

reflection on my part. The learning environment becomes dynamic and responsive for everyone involved. I do not simply follow the ‘chalk and talk’ formula to ‘complete’ the course and to groom future experts. An individual is able to shift from a position of ignorance to a position of awareness, given time, opportunity and a respectful environment in which to do so.

### Conclusions

I cannot attain certain learning experiences without a mentoring process that provides the safety that facilitates honesty and opportunity. The act of mediation also acts to diffuse the intensity of emotional, physical and intellectual response to circumstances outside of the norm. This process requires a certain confidence on the part of the educator. I need to trust in the students. I cannot fear them and their responses. I no longer see them as passive consumers, but active, intense agents responding eagerly, even tempestuously as we discuss how the knowledge we are experiencing connects with our actual lives.

An important element of this course is our approach to the academic performance. Rather than seeing myself as responsible for relaying information, transferring data to students, I choose to mentor students as they explore their responses, emotional and intellectual, to carefully selected exemplar triggers. In so doing, I free myself from traditional roles, as do the students. We collaborate in creating a liminal space in which the diversity in perspective and knowledge amongst students becomes the strength of the learning experience, rather than the barrier. Students then model for themselves the means by which they may engage in cross-cultural discourse when relating to and working with Indigenous peoples in the future.

I argue that we can only source true reflection in actual experience. We can think about information all we like, but it ultimately remains abstract and dislocated from our being until we have the essential and embodied experience of other knowledge systems from which we are then able to reflect. Students inevitably experience themselves consciously because of reflexivity. The role of the objective observer is challenged. They discover themselves as emotional as well as intellectual beings, who cannot position themselves as separate from the world in which they exist. In gaining insights about themselves, they are transformed sometimes, uncomfortably. Transformation in this context assists in equipping students for later professional experience. I hope to equip them with a means by which to acknowledge and reflect on events they may experience in the future, thus providing them with the opportunity to explore their own practice as a part of those experiences.

The course remains one that generates intense response. Some students continue the discursive reflection for years afterwards. In 2010, I received an intimate and honest reflections squeezed onto a number of large postcards from a student travelling from northern China to El Salvador to work with Indigenous peoples. I felt compelled to respond even though I lacked any formal forum to do so and found myself laughing and glowing over the moment. The honesty is crucial. If students are able to break through their fantasies, their expectations, their assumptions about the world, they are able to see, hear, feel and think differently.

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