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Dawn Darlaston-Jones
University of Notre Dame Australia, Dawn.Darlaston-Jones@nd.edu.au

Ashleigh Owen

Annie Lee

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Transforming Higher Education through Transformative Practice

Dawn Darlaston-Jones, Ashleigh Owen & Annie Lee
University of Notre Dame Australia

Critical community psychology is characterised by a set of principles which guide practice. These include the deconstruction of assumptions that reinforce marginalisation and discrimination through critical consciousness, respect for diversity, an emphasis on equity and liberation. While these principles can be included in the content of courses and taught as guiding frameworks for future practitioners, to what extent do these principles guide educators in their practice? In this session we unpack the realities of the contemporary higher education sector and discuss the challenges associated with ensuring that students have voice and are active participants in their education. Using Tanaka's framework of *voice, power, authenticity, self-reflexivity, and reconstruction* we analyse the development of the Behavioural Science programme at the university of Notre Dame to identify successes and opportunities for improvement that promote inclusion while educating for social change.

The Possible Future

Critical community psychology is characterised by a set of principles which guide practice. These include the deconstruction of assumptions that reinforce marginalisation and discrimination through critical consciousness, respect for diversity, an emphasis on equity and liberation. While these principles can be included in the content of university courses and taught as guiding frameworks for future practitioners, to what extent do these principles guide educators in their practice? In this session we unpack the realities of the contemporary higher education sector and discuss the challenges associated with ensuring that students have voice and are active participants in their education. Using Tanaka's framework of *voice, power, authenticity, self-reflexivity, and reconstruction* we analyse the development of the Behavioural Science programme at the University of Notre Dame to identify successes and opportunities for improvement that promote inclusion while educating for social change.

We want to examine *what could be* rather than *what is* (Giroux, 1983) in the context of higher education and society. Rather than looking at the multicultural approaches of achieving social integration and harmony in the community we echo the argument presented by Tanaka (2003) and suggest that Australian universities can, and perhaps should, take the lead in promoting a plural society based on mutual respect and understanding of difference. The past twenty years have seen significant structural change within higher education as a result of economic rationalism and the vocational focus of the business sector influencing decision making within the sector. It has been argued that attention for the immediate future must now be focused on the *culture* of the university in order to affect social change at the institutional and societal levels (Bartell, 2003; Tierney, 1999). This is particularly relevant to a multicultural nation such as Australia where it becomes imperative to create and educational system that is relevant to all citizens not just those of the dominant group.

To achieve this goal universities need to be transformed into pluralistic spaces that expect, and plan for difference within the student body (Tanaka, 2003). This demands recognition of the synergy between the university setting and the student and how relationships can contribute to the creation of citizenship based on mutual

respect and value *across* difference. This suggests that the partnership between the student and the institution becomes central to the outcomes achieved. The student needs to recognise and accept his/her responsibilities to study in relation to motivation and commitment, and the university needs to provide an environment conducive to success that recognises the diversity of its students in terms of their backgrounds as well as the roles they are adopting. Consequently, institutions need to build flexible inclusive cultures that expect and value the different types of students that are entering university.

This entails two different but equally important approaches. First at a surface level this would involve the development of structures that include (but is not limited to) on-line learning with appropriate support services; evening and early morning class times; flexible office hours for academic staff and student services, especially in the student administration and library area; and, opportunities for students and academics to meet informally to talk and engage. This includes a re-evaluation of staff/student ratios with a view to reducing class sizes. However, as has already been mentioned such major shifts cannot occur without serious assessment of the implications such changes would have for academic and administrative staff.

While at one level such strategies might be regarded as a simplistic solution to a complex problem the benefit is that these adjustments to the daily operations of the university provide a visible, immediate message to students that the university understands the complexity in their lives and is making an effort to accommodate this. In this way the student experiences a culture of understanding and support rather than rigidity in its daily functioning. Many universities, most notably the New Generation institutions, are already utilising these initiatives in an effort to support their students and therefore for these universities, the focus can be transferred to the deeper more complex, and critical analysis of the university culture. However, the challenge exists for the more traditional universities to follow this example and adjust their ideology in line with the needs of the contemporary student

The second component requires a deeper, and more fundamental ideological shift in that it calls into question the dominant teaching and learning practices in relation to their relevance to the new generation of student, and to the creation of the value base of society. If the student population is multicultural and multi-class then so too our educational processes and course content need to reflect this change by deconstructing the taken-for-granted knowledge that we are

privileging and disseminating. It calls for the discourses that maintain asymmetrical power relations (Prilleltensky, 2003b) in the learning context, and the community to be challenged by creating a teaching and learning environment, or a 'community of learning', that positions the student at the foundation (Hanno, 1999); a critical approach to education based on the liberation theories of Freire (1970; Freire, 1998, 1999); and a reassessment of how the content we teach privileges certain groups over others (Riggs, 2004). Such an approach requires deep scrutiny of the curriculum in relation the types of knowledge that is taught and the hidden implications of including, or excluding, other knowledge and perspectives, and it includes integration of the student's external world into the learning environment (Bartell, 2003). This approach does not change the fundamental power dynamics in that academic staff are still in a dominant position in relation to student assessment for example, but it changes the dynamic relative to the type of knowledge that is taught, and therefore privileged, and this could have dramatic benefits to students who feel isolated and marginalised by the dominant ideology.

In reviewing the model of wellbeing (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002) it can be seen how the culture that operates in our universities can translate into the wider community. For the withdrawing student the negative experience of university can have potentially long term affects that might also impact on subsequent generations. Failing to achieve a goal in one domain can translate into failure in other domains due to the effects of the self fulfilling prophecy and learned helplessness (R. Jones, 1977). There is evidence to support the notion that the economic disadvantage associated with these psychological responses to failure are inherited by the children, and thus creates a generational cycle of poverty and poor self esteem (F. Edwards, 1993; Tierney & Wright, 1991). This outcome reinforces the dominant cultural narrative of individualism and competition because the person sees his or her lack of success as evidence of a lack of ability.

In contrast the persistent student learns to identify instances when poor performance is not the result of personal deficit but rather is caused by the clash of worldviews between the student and the institution. The status quo insists it is the student who must adjust his or her value base to that of the university and therefore this can be interpreted as systemic failure because the university is failing to acknowledge the diversity of views represented by the changing student

population. As a result of this insight the student develops resistance strategies that enhance his or her resilience and ability to persist.

The cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) associated with this personal growth is also transferred to subsequent generations who learn that in order to achieve a goal one needs to resist systemic barriers. This outcome too is likely to reinforce the dominant cultural narrative as it is interpreted as being through individual effort that the person was able to succeed. Consequently both the current alternatives promote and reinforce the status quo and society remains entrenched in an ideology that serves to segregate and isolate individuals from each other; hence the need for transformational change within higher education that challenges these dominant normative positions.

Viewing the university as a community allows for the creation of structures and processes that promote personal and collective wellbeing so that this then translates into home and work and beyond. So in creating a university environment that promotes respect and understanding across difference for its students we are training our future leaders, managers, educators, and citizens to be respectful and understanding of others. In this way it becomes possible to build a society that is based on the principles of social justice, equity and peace (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002; Tanaka, 2003).

By developing context relevant strategies specifically targeted to their own student population universities can effect change within their existing frameworks and constraints. One of the principle areas of change is for the universities and the staff employed within them (academic and administrative) to become reflexive practitioners, whereby they engage in constant assessment of their practices, policies, and processes in terms of five probes *voice, power, authenticity, self-reflexivity, and reconstruction.* In practical terms this can be translated into the following set of questions:

1. *Who is it good for?* Critique the proposed action in relation to who benefits from the action (O'Neill, 1989)
2. *Who is disadvantaged?* Challenge the potential consequences to identify risk of harm as a consequence of the action (O'Neill, 1989; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996)
3. *What discourse is reinforced by the action?* Is the proposed action hegemonic in its practice? (Gergen, 1999; Wetherell & Potter, 1992)

4. *What degree of complementarity exists in the action?* That is the degree to which personal growth is linked to community growth (Tanaka, 2003)

One of the principle areas where this reflective practice can be engaged effectively is the teaching and learning strategies employed by academic staff and the type of knowledge that is transmitted as this is likely to have the greatest effect by creating a learning context that is meaningful to the student and that can contribute to social change (Ditcher, 1999; Hunter, 1999; Sander et al., 2000). Related to this, and as a parallel exercise, administrators and decision makers need to subject their policies and procedures to the same degree of scrutiny to ensure equity and prevent unintended discrimination caused by binary oppositional categorisation practices. This means that rather than develop additional services for `others' such as centres for Indigenous students, retention programmes for non-traditional students, and other such categorisation that we develop norms based on relational networks that strengthen our interconnectedness (Gergen, 1999; Prilleltensky, 2003b; Riggs, 2004). This includes an understanding of the relationship between knowledge and power and a critique of the dominant community narratives (Rappaport, 2000) that objectify the individual rather than valuing the various subject positions each of us adopt.