PURSING INDIGENOUS-INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM *in* SOCIAL WORK TERTIARY EDUCATION: FEELING MY WAY *as a* NON-INDIGENOUS EDUCATOR

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▨ Abstract

The retention and completion rates of Indigenous students undertaking tertiary studies continue to be disappointing. The contribution of Eurocentric curricula to such an outcome has been proposed in the Australian and international literature. Remaining very conscious of my status as a white, female, social work educator teaching at a regional university, over the last six years I have attempted to pursue the development of a more Indigenous-inclusive curricula and thus contribute to increasing Indigenous graduates from our degree programmes. This article documents some of my actions to rectify gaps in my own non-Indigenous knowledge base as a reflective learner under Indigenous supervision within the academy and in the community. Action to advance the development of accurate, useful curriculum and teaching practices respectful of Indigenous knowledges is recommended.

▨ Introduction

Over the last decade, there has been an urgent need for more initiatives aimed at increasing degree completions for Indigenous peoples (Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002). Since 2000 there has been a reversal of engagement of Indigenous Australians in higher education after growing numbers of Indigenous students in the 1980s and1990s (Brabham et al., 2002; Wright, 2005). Most recent evidence suggests that the retention and completion rates of Indigenous students at a tertiary level continue to be disappointing (Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC), 2006; Krause et al., 2005). Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators have identified that Eurocentric curricula at primary, secondary and tertiary levels is a factor, noting it can be foreign to, excluding of, and can discriminate against Indigenous students (Christensen & Lilley, 1997; Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002; Gair et al., 2005b; Herbert, 2000; Lampert & Lilley, 1996; McConville, 2002; Nakata & Muspratt, 1994; Neegan, 2005; Ruwhui, 1999; Youngblood Henderson, 2000).

In curricula taught in the School of Social Work and Community Welfare at James Cook University (hereafter our School) we include content highlighting the devastating aftermath of colonisation for Indigenous Australians (e.g., Atkinson, 2002; Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Secretariat, 1997; Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997a, 1997b; Briskman, 2003; Langton, 2002; Pearson, 1994; Pearson, 2000; Pearson, 2003; Reynolds, 2000). These inclusions are most relevant and necessary. However, what is still minimal is relevant content from which Australian Indigenous social welfare students might build knowledge and skills for practice as social work and welfare professionals.

Numbers of Indigenous students in our School and in the social welfare profession remain well below the proportionate numbers of Indigenous people in our community. This disproportion is reflected nationally and internationally (Briskman, 2003; Sinclair, 2004). It is acknowledged here that the intergenerational

damage and stolen generations resulting from past child welfare policies in Australia and other colonised countries may influence the attractiveness of the social welfare profession as a career path for Indigenous Australians (Sinclair, 2004). However, this influence does not explain decreasing Indigenous student numbers nor excuse passivity regarding the need for relevant tertiary education for existing Indigenous students.

In our School, we agreed with the raised voices calling for increased employment of Indigenous Australians in social work and welfare practice and in tertiary education. This was to be facilitated by teaching and learning that was highly relevant to, and reflective of, Indigenous cultural ways of helping and working (Gilbert, 2001; Herbert, 2000; Lynn et al., 1998; McConville, 2002; Nakata & Muspratt, 1994; Neegan, 2005; Ruwhui, 1999; Youngblood Henderson, 2000).

The problem was who would undertake curriculum development (in our School we particularly encouraged applications from Indigenous people for academic vacancies, nevertheless we had no Indigenous staff) as we waited for Indigenous people to study, graduate and become employed as social welfare practitioners and educators. A related significant concern was that placing the full responsibility for our School's curriculum development upon to the shoulders of such new recruits, when no other (white) educator is required to take up such total responsibilities, is discrimination. Indeed, Dominelli (1989) speaks of Indigenous academics (and students) who are the victims of a process she calls "dumping"; the expectation that Indigenous peoples can and will always act as cultural experts. Equally, Huggins (1998, p. 115) speaks of the expectations and demands placed on Indigenous peoples to educate non-Indigenous academics and students about their own racism when it is "the responsibility of academics ... via the curriculum".

Tripcony's (2004) words affirm the position that the responsibility for successful completions is "everybody's business" (Tripcony, 2004, p. 1). Yet the ongoing damage perpetuated by white peoples in the name of helping and educating, in particular by "white women", is evident in the literature (e.g., de Ishtar, 2004; Maynard, 2005). Equally, literature has identified white people's blindness to white privilege (Jensen, 2005; McIntosh, 1988). Many writers now dispute the legitimacy of non-Indigenous academics to teach, research and write about Indigenous history and contemporary issues including racism, objecting to the development (Indigenising) of curricula and delivery of the content selected through colonist lenses (Bin-Sallik, 2003; de Ishtar, 2004; Larson & Brown, 1997; Smith, 1999). Conversely, some authors argue that antiracism can and should be taught by white educators and they condemn the perceived "flight

from responsibility" by mainstream tertiary educators (Baldwin, 1996, p. 20).

In partial agreement with Baldwin (1996) and others (e.g., Huggins, 1998) I considered curriculum review to be the work of all academics. Yet, I felt anxious, somewhat immobilised and perhaps even illegitimate as a "white woman" educator, as I struggled to contribute to our quest for increased numbers of Indigenous graduates through improved ("Indigenised") curriculum (Baldwin, 1996; Larson & Brown, 1997; Lee, 1995). Nevertheless I considered a paradigm shift was needed in social work education (Crawford, 1997), not the least in my own thinking in order that we avoided remaining perpetrators in the tertiary teaching context through colluding with Eurocentric pedagogy thus compounding Indigenous disadvantage (Aird, 2006; Youngblood Henderson, 2000). I drew from a range of writers to conclude, belatedly, that much social welfare curricula provided a means for knowledge-building about Aboriginal peoples as victims of a problem (colonisation), predominantly positioned from a white perspective (as "other"), but did not advance practice knowledge for Indigenous students, and could engender a victim-rescuer mindset in non-Indigenous students (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2003; Heron, 1992; Lynn et al., 1998; Pearson 2003; Ruwhui, 1999; Sinclair, 2004). New, meaningful, heartfelt ways of teaching and learning, working and writing appeared to be needed. The rest of this paper identifies some of my endeavours in this quest.

Approach to my learning

Auto-ethnography is described by Ellis and Bochner (2000) as a genre of writing and research inviting multiple layers of consciousness, where there is a focus outward on the social and the cultural, and then inward on the self. It incorporates "concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739) and requires a type of "outing process" (Flemons & Green, 2002, p. 166) where the researcher exposes "a vulnerable self" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). In agreement with the authors above and with Holt (2003) I considered that auto-ethnography was a useful way to examine, and to tell a story about, my teaching experiences in a self-reflexive way. In addition, the writings of Clark (2000) have contributed to my self-reflection. Clark (2000) advocates taking the stance of learner and incorporating empathy to imagine a deeper thinking about learning. Overall, an auto-ethnographic, empathic approach is used to track advancement in my own learning as a white, female, tertiary educator seeking to improve my teaching. This learning encapsulates an action research process of doing, reflecting, writing, and sharing as I ask myself "How can I improve my own teaching?" in relation to curriculum that is relevant to Indigenous Australians.

▓ Learning from Indigenous teachers

In late 1999 I sought unpaid mentoring from an Aboriginal educator within our university, but simultaneously submitted an application to our University's Teaching and Learning Committee for a small teaching and learning grant (initially unsuccessful, but successful in 2001) to fund such mentoring/supervision. The proposed project recruited an Indigenous consultant who would mentor and advise interested non-Indigenous staff (there were no Indigenous staff at the time) of our School to facilitate curriculum change (reported elsewhere, see Gair et al., 2005a). The outcomes of the project were very useful but highlighted significant gaps in my knowledge base as a tertiary educator. I realised that I had some knowledge about Aboriginal Australians (Heron, 1992), less knowledge about Torres Strait Islanders, but no professional knowledge regarding learning from or with Indigenous Australians on their terms.

In 2003, I successfully negotiated, after initial introductions from a community member, to spend three months as a volunteer (learner) at an Aboriginal, traditional-owner organisation in a small town in North Queensland. Some of that time was also spent visiting an Aboriginal community northwest of the town. While this time was relatively short, it had a profound effect on me. Day-to-day and mostly accompanying the male manager, I attended many formal and less formal meetings between elders, staff, state and local government departments, and community members. I attended staff meetings, field trips, and sessions on health and social issues. I felt humbled attending planning meetings for a significant community memorial event (for loss of Aboriginal lives previously unacknowledged) and then attending the commemorative opening.

I increased my knowledge substantially about Native Title through reading, related meetings and discussions with elders and community members. I solicited suggestions from elders and community members about how to increase the number of Indigenous students studying in our School. Additionally I sought suggestions about how to improve my subject content and delivery in order that non-Indigenous graduates would work more respectfully with Indigenous peoples. Many people spoke to me about racism from white professionals.

I had underestimated the generosity and great capacity of Indigenous people to take up the role of teacher as I took up the role of learner; this surprise a reminder of aspects of my own racism and colonial blinkers. The learning process occasionally was uncomfortable, sometimes humorous and often humbling and emotional. One example was when the male manager exclaimed one day, "we had another white woman here once and she was worse than you Sue!" Overall, I had many insightful discussions with my teachers/supervisors prompted by the daily activities. In return for my learning, I provided assistance with a large grant application and other writing (for example draft strategic document, draft survey, minutes), as had been my reciprocal commitment.

At this time, I gained a much more comprehensive understanding of the limited nature of the Indigenous content within subjects I taught. Notwithstanding the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander helping styles and work with families and communities (e.g., the work of Bessarab, 2000; Lynn et al., 1998), I could now identify huge gaps in my coverage of Indigenous understanding and ways of working in many social welfare practice areas. For example, I identified that a major deficit in the organisational practice subject I taught was content on understanding Indigenous community organisations and organisational practices and processes, including culturally-grounded governance. Information on Indigenous community work, planning community events, and undertaking community research was limited in subjects I taught. Similarly, Indigenous approaches to decision-making processes; leadership, conflict resolution, theories, policy-making, ethics, networking, healing, resistance, advocacy, and brokerage virtually were non-existent. I recognised a lack of content regarding working separately with men and women. Further, it was evident that Indigenous women's perspectives on feminism, childcare and child protection, and examples of Aboriginal women's activism virtually were absent from our programme. As I sought to meet Indigenous women in the community, one woman asked me if I could document her stories of family violence, and those of family members, in order that the community may access such stories, particularly young people. I worried about taking control of documenting their stories, not the least because of past criticism about white researchers interpreting and misappropriating Indigenous people's stories, and because we had talked about me using the stories in my teaching.

During discussions over the next 12 months, we planned and sought funding for a writing workshop where the women would write their own stories. This joint venture between a regional domestic violence service, our School and an Indigenous publisher, meant that the women would retain ownership and control of their stories and gain valuable writing skills. Three small workshops ran in 2004, 2005, and 2006. A published Indigenous illustrator and a successful author gave specific instruction. It evolved that each workshop began with sharing stories and concerns in relation to family violence, and moved on to writing techniques, exercises to get started, and beginning to write about lived experiences with particular audiences in mind. I joined in as co-facilitator and group member, sharing ideas, sharing my own story of family violence, and undertaking the writing exercises in the workshops. Since 2006 the Indigenous women's

writing group small grant has been exhausted, and stories have not advanced to the stage of publication, but this project has given life to other processes.

I came to understand this writing group as a powerful example of activism and an act of resistance by women willing to take significant risks to start writing their stories in order to make them available to the community. Of course, Indigenous story writing as acts of resistance, and writing to highlight injustices and seek social justice, is nothing new and is evident in the literature (see Huggins, 1998; Kennedy, 1990; Langford, 1988; Older Women's Network, 2003; Ouellette, 2002; The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence Report, 1999; Wingard & Lester 2001). Yet, in the past, I had not perceived writing so clearly as an example of resistance and activism that I could discuss in the professional helping subjects I taught. I returned to work committed to, and active in, bringing about significant change to my teaching and students' learning within our School.

Discussion

As noted earlier, Indigenous students continue to have disappointing outcomes at a tertiary level. Reports by Krause et al. (2005) and Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) (2006) confirm the current, urgent need for ongoing, awareness and commitment regarding success for Indigenous Australian peoples in tertiary education. Recent research undertaken within our School (Gair et al., 2005b) confirms general findings evident elsewhere in the literature that universities are still alien territory for Indigenous students (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2003; IHEAC, 2006). More specifically, it indicated that educational outcomes could be further enhanced through intensive support (academic, economic and community), recognition of prior learning, understanding the profound barriers to study for many Indigenous students, and teaching curriculum that reflected knowledge broader than "only the white way" (Gair et al., 2005b, p. 58).

Importantly, Bennett and Zubrzycki (2003) report that key aspects of Indigenous practice need to be positioned as core knowledge. They document experiences of Indigenous students as "a mix of determination to get through the course, isolation and alienation in terms of their perspectives and values, coupled with high expectations from their lecturers that they understood all things Aboriginal" (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2003, p. 65). Additionally, Indigenous workers reported needing to work harder in order to be recognised as a professional and being left to educate their non-Indigenous professional supervisors on "culturally sensitive practice" (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2003, p. 68). On the latter point, Gair et al. (2005b) similarly found that some Indigenous social work students on field placement were used to advise non-Indigenous field educators on cultural matters.

One transparent strategy to increase non-Indigenous educators and practitioners' "cultural" knowledge may be located within the realm of professional supervision. McMahon (2002) discusses professional supervision, a highly valued component of the social welfare profession (Grauel, 2002), as encapsulating three aspects: relationship, developmental process and learning environment. McMahon (2002) identifies that in this type of supervision, a "learning alliance" (p. 18, citing Holloway, 1995) develops when the supervisor creates a learning environment but the supervisee is viewed as "self-managed learners" who develops their own learning goals (p. 19, citing Proctor, 1994). This concept of supervision as a learning alliance is reminiscent, from my perspective, of the learning I have experienced during the journey described above under supervision from Indigenous people.

A second useful strategy from my perspective may be revisiting the concept of empathy. As noted above within the "Approach to my learning" section of this article, empathy was incorporated to imagine a deeper thinking about learning. Clark (2000) recommends that professionals take up the position of learner, rather than that of expert in order to better understand, particularly in a cross-cultural context. Clark (2000) appears to recognise the dangers of this process, somewhat reminiscent of Dominelli's (1989) concept of "dumping" (noted earlier). Rather, Clark advocates for a deeper listening as learner, for insight into cultural meanings. Engaging in and modelling deeper (empathic) listening and learning as educators may be helpful in advancing meaningful education and practice for Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) students. Of course, these notions are not new and Indigenous writers commonly appeal to the non-Indigenous community to listen and learn new understandings through heightened (cultural) awareness of their Eurocentrism (Huggins, 1998; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; McConville, 2002; Page & Asmar, 2004; Youngblood Henderson, 2000).

My learning to date has convinced me that Indigenous Australians must be recruited to undertake at least some of the teaching within social work and welfare studies. I believe that I more adequately than in the past, can facilitate students' learning from this new position of growing insight. However, I agree with Larson and Brown (1997) that, inevitably, some reinforcement of oppression will always be present in my teaching because of my coloniser status within a colonised space. My learning is ongoing but has advanced, due to the learning experiences described above, beyond any previous learning I have experienced from professional development, supervision, academic mentoring or previous practice experience. Perhaps regrettably, but understandably, it was a non-Indigenous author that crystallised for me this concept from an Indigenous writer (evidence of my own need for culturally familiar concepts for learning to be achieved). Tacy (2000, p. 117) writes that

Aboriginal spirituality, then, is a spirituality of deep seeing and deep listening. Mirium Rose Ungunmerr describes this ... (as) dadirri, and says 'this is something like what you [white people] call 'contemplation' ... This kind of receptive spirituality is very hard for us westerners to achieve.

Considering the writing of Mirium Rose Ungunmerr (1993) and Tacy (2000) in relation to my learning experiences, I believe I have glimpsed a new level of heart-felt awareness.

In summary, while remaining alert to the aforementioned, hidden "dumping", it seems respectful and transparent to recognise and respect, in a genuine rather than tokenistic way, the teachings and learnings that may be available to tertiary educators from our Indigenous colleagues, and from within our communities. By seeking a learning alliance through supervision from Indigenous colleagues, either paid or reciprocal (see Hawkin & Worrall, 2002), non-Indigenous educators (and practitioners) can learn about and demonstrate respectful relationships with Indigenous peoples. Solicited professional supervision as suggested here is different from exploiting colleagues' (and students') knowledge. Ideally, curriculum can be developed and taught in collaborative alliances with Indigenous Australians in ways that model and mirror professional relationships, friendships, empathy, and respect (Huggins, 1998).

Kierkegaard (1980, cited and discussed in Miller, 2003) speaks of an anxiety suffered by persons not in correct and truthful relations with others, and a transparency and legitimacy when the self is in correct relations with others (Miller, 2003). It seems useful for non-Indigenous social work educators to actively seek to be in "correct relations" with Indigenous Australians as a part of any educative process. Of course, accurate, useful curriculum and teaching practices respectful of Indigenous knowledges also are crucial for non-Indigenous social welfare graduates who, at some point in their careers, would be expected to lend political and social support to Indigenous Australians' in their quest for self-determination.

Conclusion

Documented above is my progress as a non-Indigenous learner/contemplator pursuing ways to better incorporate Indigenous knowledge, skills and practice into my curriculum. As a white, female, tertiary educator, I have attempted to take my share of the responsibility to facilitate increased numbers of Indigenous graduates from our degree programmes. An auto-ethnographic, empathic approach is used to frame and give meaning to the discussion of my thinking, feelings, critical reflection, and new knowledge acquired through community engagement and supervision. Supervision

from Indigenous people within the academy and in the community has provided essential learning for me, as a tertiary social welfare educator, and for some of my colleagues, in our quest to provide a safe learning environment and relevant content for Indigenous social work students. This quest is still in its infancy and will have some limitations and boundaries for non-Indigenous educators. Nevertheless, from my perspective, what started out as knowledge sought for improved social welfare education has provided profound transformative learning for me.

Acknowledgements

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▨ About the author

Susan Gair has worked at James Cook University since 1991. During that time she has undertaken research, published in national and international journals, and lobbied with colleagues and community members nationally regarding the need for change in social work education for increased numbers of Indigenous students, and increased Indigenous graduates entering the social welfare profession. Susan has visited universities in Canada and New Zealand seeking information and talking to Indigenous scholars regarding curriculum inclusive of and relevant to First Nations peoples. Susan's primary areas of teaching include research methods, antiracist practice and interpersonal skills.