Disruption and Understanding in Professional Teaching Contexts

Susan L. Whatman

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Introduction

Much of my teaching career has been devoted to disrupting and reconfiguring hegemonic educational decision-making practices to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' knowledges (also referred to as Indigenous knowledges) into the disciplines at all levels of schooling and tertiary education. I do this from a non-Indigenous standpoint, with a personal, political, and professional commitment to doing so defining my teaching philosophy and professional teaching practice. The theories that have shaped my approach to embedding Indigenous knowledges include Nakata's (2007) theory of the Cultural Interface, Ladson-Billings (1998) application of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education, bell hooks' (1994) philosophy of engaged, transgressive pedagogy and, more recently, Todd's (2014) educational philosophy for personal, moral, and ethical relations and liminality in classroom experiences. Perhaps, more conventionally, Bernstein's (1990) social construction of pedagogic discourse, revealing relations and relationships that underpin educational decision-making, has also been highly influential on my work.

Teachers beginning their careers may not yet have realized the importance of not only articulating their teaching philosophy, but understanding how it drives professional practice. However, it cannot operate as depersonalized, apolitical *professionalism* in teaching, or teacher education. Personal, political, and professional commitment are inextricably linked, nurtured, and reflected in everyday lived experiences, enacted decisions, and their consequences. This chapter then explores how the afore-mentioned theories came into my life experiences and teaching practices in Indigenous education, the inter-twined reflection and learning, and subsequent interrelated pedagogic, curricular and assessment decision-making they enabled – Bernstein's three message systems of schooling. What also emerges is how career decision-making generates these encounters, enables the learning and shapes career choices to come. As Todd (2014, citing Arendt 1959) reminds us, "we do not know beforehand who we will become – that 'who' only emerges in the relational space we share with others" (p. 149).

Understanding the Cultural Interface

Martin Nakata, an Education professor from the Torres Strait Islands, has published highly influential works on the Cultural Interface and Indigenous Standpoint Theory (c.f. 2007). Nakata (2007) posed the intriguing question of what does it take to savage the disciplines. In addressing that question, he set a challenge for educators to consider how might Indigenous knowledges disrupt the borders, the taken-for-grantedness of the forms of content, the essential skills and pedagogies, the inclusion and exclusion of acceptable forms of demonstrating, or the valid realization of knowing, using Bernsteinian language, within those disciplines. What is always taught? Who are the Grand Theorists? What would be replaced if Indigenous knowledges were to unsettle these disciplines and would educators even recognize their own discipline if they did? I have been working on this challenge in Health and Physical Education (abbreviated in Australia to HPE) – my personal-political-professional commitment and role as a PETE educator – through a series of HPE practitioner magazine articles aimed at HPE teachers and academic journal

articles intended for PETE educators. Disrupting norms per se is not a new call, with racism, classism, and sexism identified as persistent intersecting characteristics of PE and PETE. However, using Indigenous knowledges to disrupt White hegemonic norms around what it means to be healthy and well or/and what it means to move in legitimate ways is a novel application of the theory of the cultural interface in PETE and one that is slowly gaining traction, both in Australia and internationally.

Basil Bernstein, an Educational sociologist, devised a well-known concept called “the three message systems of education” – curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation (or assessment) which assists to identify sites and agents of disruption. How do Indigenous knowledges disrupt powerful voices and persistent messages or alter systems and fields of knowledge production and recontextualization (Bernstein [1990](#))? How can Indigenous teachers and educators employ Bernstein in understanding these hegemonic power struggles, in ways that allow them to exercise their communities’ democratic stake in an education system that respects their knowledges? Bernstein’s conceptual tools for unpacking relations in schooling at the broad political scale, as well as micro-interpersonal levels within school sites, provide useful ways to address the tensions around *whose* knowledges and pedagogies will be privileged thus facilitating Indigenous agency in embedding their knowledges in curriculum, pedagogic, and assessment decision-making in the cultural interface.

Who Was I When I Decided to Become a Teacher?

I was drawn to the possibilities of a teaching career in much the same way as other teachers. My mother was a Health and Physical Education, or HPE, teacher and my father was a tennis and squash coach, so my earliest memories are of my parents teaching people how to move. Their professional work brought countless people into my life via our squash and tennis center, in local competitions and coaching arrangements. My parents’ work provided my earliest jobs, cleaning and caring for various tennis and squash court surfaces, helping my father with coaching juniors (players basically younger than me as a young teenager) and refereeing.

Before finishing the Higher School Certificate (HSC) in Year 12 in my public school in New South Wales, I knew I wanted to apply to be a PE teacher too. I thought it would involve teaching lots of sport to enthusiastic and capable movers. My first aha moment here, realized eventually on teaching practicum, was that my experience of and joy in movement did not allow me to see or appreciate other students’ experiences of movement, and that their experiences always occurring in relation to capable and often aggressive others were not joyful, and were mostly unwelcome and unwanted.

Life Experiences and Teaching Practices in Indigenous Education

Studying at university, working alongside more capable movement educators in my teacher education degree made me rethink my career choice. I decided that being a university lecturer – still working with people who like PE – was my new professional goal. I was going to teach in schools for a few years, really as short a time as possible “for practitioner credibility,” then segue to tertiary teaching. It did not quite work out like that. While finishing what was essentially an honors year, I was already a qualified teacher taking contract work in local schools, as well as doing sessional tutoring back into my old Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) program at university and working as a research assistant for one of my previous Professors. I was also coaching hockey teams in independent school competitions, playing and refereeing First Division hockey myself with all of its training commitments, but still looking for any opportunity to work on a more permanent basis at the university. A position to tutor Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in core coursework including Anatomy, Physiology, and Biomechanics through the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS), a federally funded tutoring program to support Indigenous student tertiary completions, was referred to me by one of my PETE lecturing colleagues. I made enquiries at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit, a student support

center, one of which was established in every university across Australia, and was offered the work.

Growing up on what I now know is *Minjungbal* land in the *Bundjalung* Nation of northern New South Wales (on the East coast of Australia), I had plenty of Aboriginal and Islander hockey friends. It was only in that social, competitive context that we related to one another. None of the Aboriginal girls with whom I played hockey lived near me or studied at my public school, so on the field and during representative trips away were the only times we trained together and socialized. The way I looked upon these sport-contingent friendships in my childhood meant that I did not think twice about any lack of Indigenous knowledge on my part nor how it would affect my professional ability to be a useful ITAS tutor. I was good at PE, academically inclined, I did not think I had any problems relating to Indigenous students not much younger than myself, based on my sport experiences, so I thought I had all the requisite skills to be good at tutoring *any* student. I had some successes and some failures in tutoring – if you take students successfully completing the subject for which I was their tutor as the criterion – and I really enjoyed the work. I derived tremendous satisfaction from seeing students explain the requisite biomedical disciplinary knowledge and they kept coming back for weekly tutoring sessions, so I thought that they must have felt some value in it. At this point, I still did not appreciate what I did not know about all things Indigenous in Australia, but I was willing to stay there in the university sector in Indigenous education and learn more. But, at this point, I still thought my knowledge system provided me with as much as I needed to know to be successful in these encounters.

I applied for a full time Associate Lecturer position at the Indigenous student support center – twice, actually. I was not successful the first time and I cringe now at the answers I gave to the highly accomplished Indigenous academics who comprised the interview panel. Again, I did not think about what it was that I did not know, that I *could not know*, and why they did not give me the job. I applied again a year later, now with a completed Master's degree, slightly better interview answers, and was awarded a 3-year contract. The seemingly modern precarity of university employment is not a new phenomenon, particularly not for those on the fringes of the disciplines. I was on contract for the first 9 years of my lecturing career in the early 1990s, re-applying for internationally advertised, open calls for “my job,” and only managing to hold on to “my job” on both occasions when several positions were advertised at once. How White Privilege featured in my success was just starting to enter into my consciousness as the real learning about Australian race relations, what are Aboriginal and Torres Strait perspectives, and what are Indigenous knowledges and how do you develop them (c.f. Nakata [2007](#)), were happening as a consequence of my employment and work relations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic colleagues.

In this role, I was part of a team of mostly Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander academics teaching Indigenous Studies to students in the Arts Faculty (compulsory only for Australian Studies majors) and the Education faculty (as electives for pre-service teachers). Eventually, Indigenous studies became compulsory for preservice teachers at our institution (in 2003), and the nature of teaching political history to hostile students changed our pedagogies significantly – think of Ladson-Billings' ([1998](#)) “Just what is critical race theory and what is it doing in a “nice” field like education?”. I want to give an example of the inter-twined nature of reflection and learning, and subsequent personal and professional growth such reflection entails. On one occasion, a lecturing colleague whose strength and courage always amazed me, asked me to be ready to stand by to take over reading a segment aloud to the reasonably large lecture theatre audience of a biographical account of an Aboriginal family. The segment detailed the kinds of racially-motivated power abuse by White managers experienced by Aboriginal peoples interned on an Aboriginal reserve – a place where movement and activities of Indigenous peoples were typically “managed” by White men. The story was not her actual family or community story, but yet it was – it could have been her story, or many other Aboriginal people we knew. As she predicted, she needed me to take over reading. Before that moment, I did not imagine that I would not be able to do it either. I did not know or live through this account – it was not my experience of White Australia as a White Australian – but I recall this teaching and learning

moment clearly as one when I realized that this was not only an academic job, with cynical, detached professionalism. How the moment affected me, of my Aboriginal colleague being unable to read aloud anymore the lived experience of racist oppression at the hands of people more like my Ancestors, was a revelation. I realised it *was* part of our collective story in Australia. I teared up too finishing the reading with my voice cracking, yet enormously embarrassed that I lost my emotional control in front of the students – something at that time I regarded as unprofessional.

This moment, like many others that followed, is what Todd (2014) called pedagogical liminality, and it freed me as an educator. Todd argued that we need to embrace shared emotions that arise in teaching encounters or moments, to blur the distinction between being a teacher and a student – into a liminal space where shared learning for both is only possible. Todd applies Arendt's concept of moment to teaching and learning, as something with specificity that can only occur in and as a result of the relations of you and others bound up in the moment, bounded by that exact space and time. Such moments are characterized by disrupted intentions – both yours, your colleagues, and your students – as things pan out in often unforeseeable and unknowable ways. She explained:

Pedagogically speaking, the aesthetic sensations that accompany this becoming signal the concrete, contextual nature of existing, for it is in our acute awareness of the instant, and the people and things that are part of this instant, through which a 'state of grace' is experienced. (2014, p. 238)

The opportunity to learn in such moments can be a deliberate feature of your pedagogy, rather than random occasions. bell hooks described this as engaged pedagogy, "teaching for transgression." By this, she means that teachers should be willing to reach boundaries and move beyond them, to transform teaching and learning encounters in particular ways. hooks asks us to focus on our pedagogies – warm, firm, and unrelenting pedagogies – to deliberately create experiences that harness emotion and transform not only students, but teachers. hooks argues that engaged pedagogy does not simply seek to empower students but to create encounters in which teachers are empowered and grow. She warns "empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks" (1994, p. 21). hooks implores us to really know who is in the room with us, to encourage them to take responsibility for their learning and not permit students to be passive, to "fly under the radar" in the learning journey. We all have to be actively engaged in creating our shared learning encounters.

There are many examples of how hooks' philosophy became enacted in my practice. Being a non-Indigenous educator meant that I needed to privilege the voices and experiences of Indigenous peoples into such teaching and learning moments in creative and powerful ways, which is also a central tenet of applying critical race theory in education (Ladson-Billings 1998). One of our key teaching resources selected by the course designer (c.f. Phillips 2012) was the documentary "Best Kept Secret" (1991) from the Australian Broadcasting Commission, which was a commentary on Aboriginal singer/songwriter Archie Roach's approach, through music, to race relations. After sharing his story as a child forcibly removed from his loving mother, he stresses that "*I don't want you to feel guilty – I just want you to feel*". The emotional pull of his story, one experienced by tens of thousands of Indigenous people, compellingly interwoven with distressing images, his lyrics about being stolen and sublime music, moved me and many of my students to tears, year after year, every time I showed the film. Part of my teaching repertoire was to bring a box of tissues to tutorials, advising the class that some of them would appreciate my gesture. We would discuss the idea of "professionalism" and displaying emotion in the classroom, sometimes with a provocative question such as "would you want to cry in front of your students"? I was warm but unrelenting in my approach in that learning about Indigenous-non-Indigenous race relations is a part of your professional preparation to be a teacher. I modelled for them that you do not steer clear of difficult conversations and resultant powerful emotions. You do not brush "history under the carpet" or consign it to some imagined point in time "in the past". You do not ask your students – *any* of your students – to "get over" that past as knowing this past allows educators to acknowledge the importance of understanding contemporary, ongoing race relations in the profession of teaching. It is grounded in another central tenet of critical race theory that

hegemony and oppression can be challenged when one understands oneself in relation to others and systems (Ladson-Billings [1998](#)). It is a personal-political-professional nexus, an ethical practice that cannot and should not be separated in the process of (always) becoming a teacher.

Enabling Unknowable Career Decision-Making with Indigenous Knowledges

Indigenous knowledges as a recognizable field of research was emerging in the early 2000s, achieving formal recognition with the Australian Government and appearing as a key search term in journal indices. We worked with Martin Nakata as he was sharing his theory of the Cultural Interface in the student support center on various projects, including the creation of a highly successful annual conference series – Indigenous Studies, Indigenous Knowledge (ISIK) hosted firstly by my center at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in 2006, the Jumbunna Centre of the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) in 2007 and the Riawunna Centre of the University of Tasmania in 2008. This conference series produced three rigorously Indigenous peer-reviewed journal editions which announced that the emerging (and contested) research field of Indigenous Knowledges (IK) was here to stay. For Nakata, the Cultural Interface is a lifeworld, where Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples' ways of knowing, doing, and being are in constant tension, which both constrains and enables knowing at different times, places, and spaces, giving rise to agency and change. Indigenous knowledges then, as a term, concept or label, is contested as it attempts to capture what some people call Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander perspectives, sacred knowledges, traditional Indigenous knowledges, intercultural understanding, cross-cultural knowledge, and the like. Nakata's ([2007](#)) theory assists with understanding that Indigenous Knowledges in the cultural interface are a socially-temporally constructed composite or academy of these distinct and plural knowledges, interrogating each other as they struggle to dominate or co-exist. Indigenous Knowledges is neither *one* of these types of knowledges, or all of them but, rather, what Nakata calls an overlapping set of knowledges rather than an all-encompassing one.

Another misunderstanding that often occurs is the conflation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and Indigenous knowledges. Learning from Indigenous people's knowledges and perspectives may enable educators to value and appreciate them, but does not gift these perspectives to a non-Indigenous person – they are embodied by Aboriginal peoples, grounded in who they are, where they are from, what they know, and what they've experienced. Life as experience as education, (c.f. Dewey [1969/1938](#)) does not mean non-Indigenous people “acquire” an Aboriginal perspective. Aboriginality is interwoven with knowledge of and *being* from Country, or traditional lands, totemic-relations, and kin. It is not something you acquire vicariously from living alongside and learning from Aboriginal people on their land.

Teaching and learning moments – experiences – informed by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander perspectives and learning, which is also shaped by particular theories and knowledges held by Indigenous peoples, however, enable *new* knowledge sets to be developed, by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. This is what I understand Indigenous knowledges to mean. Another moment from my teacher education career that I would like to share to illustrate this point arose out of a collegial conversation with another Aboriginal Professor who argues against the use of “Indigenous knowledges.” The argument is reasoned on the basis that “Indigenous” an anthropological label and can invoke the myth of universal or pan-Indigeneity. It anonymizes *whose* knowledge it is so, with an understanding that knowledge emanates from Country and is held by the people whose Country it is, anonymity via the label of Indigenous knowledges is unacceptable to many. As a counterpoint to the use of this term, here is another example of what Indigenous knowledges could mean or refer to. My many years of working in an Indigenous student support center were supervised by three Aboriginal scholars. On so many occasions, one of my supervisors, a *Ngugi Noonuccal* woman from *Minjerribah/Quandamooka* (also known by the settler names as North Stradbroke Island and Moreton Bay), would take me outside when I came to ask a question or solve a problem or request more information on any of my tasks. She would never directly answer my question, but would launch into a seemingly vaguely related story. It took years for me to realize that this

was *Ngugi Noonuccal* way of answering; it was knowledge specific to that group of people and perhaps similar to other Aboriginal nations. But once I finally got it, what do you call that knowledge? This was the question I posed to my colleague. It isn't just cross-cultural understanding, which somehow implies two equal knowledge systems built a bridge towards each other, never engaging before they met in the middle. It is not an embodied Aboriginal perspective. It certainly is not sacred knowledge, although the pedagogies may be similar across other secret and sacred teaching and learning encounters. My colleague replied something along the lines of "I don't know, but I am never going to call it Indigenous knowledge." And that is a reasonable (and prevalent) response to what will always remain a contested concept inside this cultural interface. It means that this phenomenon of Indigenous knowledges continues to have multitudes of labels, making it more difficult to identify scholars within an Indigenous knowledges' academy, an academy which Nakata (2007) is committed to revealing and developing with his theory of the cultural interface.

Conclusion

As a teacher-educator, I am currently where I thought I would be when I first graduated from teacher's college – working in health and physical education. Who I am at the moment has emerged as Arendt foretold, in the relational space I have shared with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, or Indigenous, academics, and many other PETE academics from around the world along the way. The circuitous journey through Indigenous knowledges, perspectives, and life experiences turned me into someone I did not know I could be and would not have become without the learning that occurred in that relational space. The way I enact my personal-political-professional commitment to teaching and learning is not because I was born and raised in an ethical, empathetic way with some innate sense of social justice, though that would help. It has had little to do with the disciplinary knowledge from the primary field of HPE, although it should. And it certainly was not a consequence of my own teacher education degree, my PETE education which, in the 1980s, paid scant attention to Indigenous knowledges. My professional practice as an educator is a direct consequence of this circuitous journey of career choices in my quest to be a teacher educator, with numerous *unknowable* relational encounters and resultant transformative moments enabling the professional learning described in this chapter.

This entry is designed to illustrate how professional teaching practice is the interface of and interplay between the personal, political, and professional. Being professional means always learning; being political means always *seeing* who is in the learning relationship with you and what they have encountered in the world you both share to be there; and, as an engaged teacher, being personal means knowing who *we all* are in this relational space, what hooks would call mutual recognition. So, in the Deweyan sense, teachers are not, and could never be, "finished" becoming teachers, becoming whoever we will be because of whom we have not yet met and experiences we have not yet had.

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