Youth Work: a deconstructive approach for those who work with young refugees

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Published
2007

Journal Title
Youth Studies Australia

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Youth work
A deconstructive approach for those who work with young refugees

Peter Westoby and Ann Ingamells contend that in an Australian institutional context that is shifting under the influence of corporate liberalism, not only has social justice lost some of its leverage as a framework for achieving change, but the constitution of youth work as a profession has also altered. They suggest that these two factors have implications for how we educate and train those who work with young people. In the context of a training workshop for workers who engage with young refugees, the paper proposes employing a deconstructive approach to youth work practice as an alternative to using a social justice framework.

Changes in the Australian institutional context, under the influence of corporate liberalism, have resulted in shifts in interventions, personnel and in the status of social justice (McDonald 2006) that impact on the delivery of youth work education, training and professional development. The impetus for this paper came from a number of cross-cultural youth worker training sessions delivered by one of the authors in association with the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland (YANQ). The workshops responded to a demand from workers with diverse qualifications, including youth workers, social work graduates, teachers, police, health workers, lawyers, local government workers and volunteers, who find themselves working with young people from diverse cultures who have come to Australia as refugees. In common, all participants wanted to better inform their cross-cultural work with young people. Beyond this, there were few common starting points. Participants had different professional frameworks and different kinds of organisational mandates. It could not be assumed that the workers shared a structural or cultural analysis, or a commitment to social justice or youth rights. Whatever approach the workshops took, it was likely that some participants would lack the scaffolding needed to explore new material. This meant the workshops needed to be structured quite differently from the ways we would usually deliver training to youth workers who, despite many differences, share a body of knowledge, and a more predictable range of analyses and skills. This
paper discusses and reflects on the approach taken in these cross-cultural workshops.

Corney (2004) states that Australian undergraduate education for youth workers tends to be left-of-centre politically, with an emphasis on social justice, advocacy, empowerment and community development. As educators and trainers, we, the authors of this paper, are gradually shifting our social justice framework to incorporate the influences of post-structural and postcolonial material. We are especially interested in deconstruction as a strategy for working with people of different cultures, worldviews and ideologies, and for working across different political ideologies.

First, we discuss social justice in a climate of institutional change, then develop a rationale for deconstruction as one possible alternative strategy for responding to shifting power dynamics. We then describe two attempts to work with deconstruction in workshops with diverse workers engaged with young people who have come to Australia as refugees. Finally, we reflect on the implications and effectiveness of such strategies.

Institutional context, social justice and deconstruction

The changing institutional context in Australia has effectively repositioned the status of rights-based arguments (Everingham 2001; McDonald 2006). Within corporate liberal politics, citizenship is being reconstructed to mean self-reliant responsibility for oneself and one’s family in the free market context (Rose 1999). Advocacy around rights may sometimes be effective, but it has diminishing purchase. Poynting and White (2004) suggest that the increasing emphasis on compliance positions youth workers between “hard cop and soft cop”, and certainly it intensifies the ideological tensions in the youth work field (Sercombe 2004). The argument in this paper is not against social justice, rights and equitable access as goals, but rather a reconsideration of the most effective way to achieve such goals in the current institutional context.

As a discourse, social justice links ends and means. The means, such as advocacy, lobbying, making rights-based claims, raising awareness and empowering people, assume certain constructions of government and of political agency. Shifts in how governments of all political persuasions see their roles and responsibilities have weakened this leverage. Intensified strategies of dividing those who provide for themselves from those who depend on the government has sent the sense of Australia as a collectivity underground and compromised community consensus on rights-based claims (Everingham 2001).

A further concern informing our search for an alternative approach was our firsthand observation of the effects that rights-based youth work approaches have had on refugee young people, their families and communities. Paradoxically, although rights discourse is linked to collectivity and egalitarianism, it is experienced by families and refugee community leaders as providing permission for young people to access the world of popular culture, global markets and materialism. An individualistic interpretation of rights by young people benefits certain interest groups within liberal polities, but invariably becomes a form of oppression for the young people themselves. Brown (1995) calls this effect of rights discourse, injury. Some youth workers may use dialogue or awareness-raising to support young people to work this through at their own pace. However, as Brooks (2006) argues, many young people assert the right to individual popular identities, while in reality “donning a prefabricated corporate and cultural mould”. Refugee families have much in common with many other families when they seek to protect their young people from this possibility, and when they reject youth work which seems to encourage it.

Once we recognised the complications and intensities at the intersection of neoliberal corporate culture, social justice discourse and young people’s pursuit of rights, it seemed appropriate to look elsewhere to inform our training. Deconstructive practices reflect Foucault’s (1991) analysis which holds that the power embedded in formal roles and systems of authority is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of domination and control. Of much greater influence are the ways we are brought
to use power on ourselves and each other through the kinds of discourses available to us (Foucault 1983). Caputo (1997, p.73) describes deconstruction as a “self revising, self-questioning mode of openness to the Other” (p.73). He implies that fostering a healthy skepticism, a realisation that the world might not be quite as our own worldview suggests, enables us to bring more of the world into view than our blinkers normally allow (Caputo 1977, p.73).

Taking deconstruction and discourse as the basis for workshop design meant that we could work with any presenting ideology in a way that privileged none, yet which enabled a way forward into practice. For those of us with a social justice bent, deconstruction encourages us to decentre so that social justice comes into view as just one discourse and possible strategy among others.

The left had been wary of deconstruction on the basis that it compromises vision, undermines structural analysis, and dissipates the basis for action by making it difficult to collectivise (Ife 1999). Fawcett & Featherstone (2000) articulate a widely held discomfort that it veers too close for comfort to neoliberal practices. The most serious critique is that deconstruction “cannot found a political program of any kind” (Spivak 2000). It works to destabilise and not to advocate or propose. It is hard to justify the shift from the strong political program of social justice to such a limiting practice.

However, Spivak (2000, p.397) also considers deconstruction “practical politics”. She compares it to the daily work of cleaning one’s teeth. Such maintenance work will not stop us from dying, as surgery perhaps might, but is of unquestionable value. Those of us who can read the injustices and power dynamics of contemporary life want to gear up for the head-on fight – which might be compared to surgery. At this point, it is instructive to note that cleaning the teeth is not incompatible with surgery, they are just different kinds of activities, done in different times and places for different purposes. So, although deconstruction is one logic (purpose and practice) and social justice another, it is not impossible to shift in and out of different logics.

Taking some of these ideas into workshops, we began listening to participants’ accounts of practice. We listened for terms that seem to carry competing meanings which intensify the energy of the story and storyteller. There were several such terms, but the deconstruction of two, youth and culture, is discussed in this paper.

Deconstructing youth

Much youth work literature documents the heuristic power of “youth” as a label for asserting the various interests of powerful groups for and against the interests of young people (Brown, Larson & Saraswathi 2002; Muncie 2004; Palmer 2003; Sercombe 1999; Wyn & White 1997, 2004). We invited participants to consider all the ways in which constructions of youth are used by various people, professions, disciplines, institutions, media, general community and so on. Participants quickly brought out the range of stereotypes and labels which position young people as threatening; at risk; vulnerable; and in need of control, curbing, fixing, developing or cultivating. With prompting, this was extended to constructions of young people that underpin laws, rights and entitlements, policies and practices. We looked at how young people are constructed by merchandisers, advertisers, each other, and by such things as move-on laws, training reform, security guards and management of shopping centres. We identified the various norms, values, traditions, customs and conventions to which various bodies think young people should conform.

To concretise the impact of this deconstruction, we got participants to draw each representation as a line on a whiteboard converging on the young person. We did not distinguish between positive and negative forces, or people who had the best interests of young people at heart and those with compliance agendas, or both. We stayed with naming the forces. By putting all representations on the board as forces impacting on young people, the pressures that must be negotiated by each young person each day became evident. Some participants were easily able to express what it felt like to be impacted by such constructions, and this

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assisted others. We aimed for a process that enabled participants to feel the weight of the forces vying to shape the young person. Adding the construct “refugee” to the construct of “young person” increased the governmental pressure, and made the weight unbearable. Bourdieu (1999) coins the phrase “the weight of the world” as a metaphor for the impact on targeted groups of the governmental desires of others, including peers, families, professionals, media and government.

Somehow, young people weave their way through all these pressures, appropriating disparate elements from which they can fashion lives and identities in circumstances far from their own choosing (Poynting & White 2004). Poynting, Noble and Tabar’s (2003) study of Lebanese young people echoes observations from our own work with more recently arrived South Sudanese. We found that if young people are constructed as a threat, whether by family or wider public, they will respond strategically in ways that reproduce perceptions of deviance. Workshop participants had stories similar to these, although they varied in the response they thought appropriate.

We discussed how participants saw their own practice and projects, their organisation and funding body as contributing to this field of force. Whether through goodwill and desire to support, or fear and desire to control, workers, parents, family members, professionals, peers and communities contribute to the pressures. Chalking up the pressures we have contributed to, and seeing the various pressures mount, brings home the fact that whether we intend to liberate or control, we add to the matrix. Whether our focus is rights or responsibilities, we add to the matrix. So the question remains as to how we can be present to a young person without adding to an already overloaded matrix.

We were somewhat surprised how readily workshop participants brought their varied worldviews and work experiences to this deconstructive process. However, at this point, a shift was needed from deconstruction to purposeful action. We wanted to shift the logic in order to reinforce the recognition that the purposeful response of a worker might be to become a sounding board for young people trying to work out the matrix for themselves. Such work requires listening with new ears, and is, as Poynting and White (2004) say, indispensable to youth work.

The value in the deconstructive process was the concretising of familiar labels into lines of force in ways that made no distinction between positive and negative intent. It was this process that brought people to a space of recognising the importance of hearing what young people have to say. The strategy exposed the fact that the intensity in the term youth has little to do with young people and everything to do with desires to govern young people.

Having opened the space where participants can see their own role in this governmental process, the question arose of how then to engage with young people. Here, alternating constructive and deconstructive logic might assist us to see that we are moved by more forces than mere goodwill. Each of us brings our fears and professional blinkers to practice.

Underpinning fear was recognition that we have scant understanding of what is important to young people of another culture, religion, family background and experience of war. As workshop leaders, we wanted to emphatically support any impetus to become familiar with the specific culture, history and religion of the people we work with. A range of uncertainties about skills, and how to engage, led some of us to want to privatise the relationship into a confidential exchange between young person and worker. Some wanted to refer on to counselling. Some wanted to advise and fix. Some wanted to promote dialogue, as a mechanism for engaging young people with themselves, each other and their various communities.

Issues of language, and of costs in working with and without interpreters, were raised. Where listening was less of a priority, it had not been evident to some how scant the service supports are. Performative pressures were strong too: feeling pressured by organisational demand for outcomes, needing a project to succeed, wanting to move straight into action, wanting to tell the young person what to think or do, and needing to prove one’s worth as a private consultant in this

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field. A milling of contestants (including ourselves) impatient to be into action (according to our own practice understandings) surrounded this moment, which had emerged in the workshop as an injunction not to fix, but to listen, hear and acknowledge what young people had to say.

Another session, another time, could deconstruct the various genealogies each practitioner brings to this will to action. The practice methodologies we each carry, embedded as they are with philosophical and governmental traces, set in train trajectories that have great implications for young people and their families, as well as for collegial action in the field. Deconstruction assists us to unpack them, hopefully with some dispassion. We hoped that this workshop process, which looked at the governmental impacts of actions from all sides of ideological divides, provided some modelling there.

Deconstructing culture

In this section of the workshop, we worked with a practice scenario offered by a workshop participant. In his work with young people from a Horn of Africa community, he noted increasing conflict between parents, community elders and young people. Elders and parents asked youth workers to help them keep their young people in the family.

Participants had a range of responses. Some thought it was not their role to engage with family and community, but they had ideas about working with the young people. Others thought it would be good to help young people and families stay connected, but felt overwhelmed by the forces pulling them apart. There were some who tried to name the issues: young people must integrate, find friends, go to school and be exposed to popular culture, while their families, who assimilate more slowly, become afraid. Common to these responses was the focus of the gaze on the refugee person, community or culture as Other.

Deconstruction could be used to focus on aspects of, or silences within, the scenario that are critical to making sense of the situation (Mazzei 2004). Or, deconstruction could begin with participants’ responses to the scenario and the familiar methodologies that emerge when participants are presented with a problem. We focused on the former strategy, hoping to effect a shift in gaze from the refugee community construed as having problems, to a bigger picture, which included the workers themselves, their familiar methodologies and the prevailing Australian culture.

Using the whiteboard to again concretise the situation, we drew two circles, representing a small community newly arrived and establishing itself with varying degrees of success and rapidity on the edges of an established community that has a different culture. Note, here the reversed binary makes the prevailing culture different and Other. We did not, but could have, asked participants to position themselves as workers within this diagram.

Having brought the two systems into view, it was easier to pose questions about the relationship between the two, to identify some of their characteristics and to look at the ways in which each is defensive and protecting something. We focused on making the invisible visible, by identifying what the host society is protecting. Participants identified resources, privilege, a way of life, a certain way of doing things, and a social and political and economic order. This approach concurs with Bhabha’s (1994) belief that cultural boundaries protect privilege, order and values. For the new community, there are costs to access, but also benefits to be gained. Assimilation is often seen as the cost – the newcomer must fit within, and contribute to, the established order. Yet, the good life of that order may not be available to them, and, meanwhile, their young are subject to some freedoms and values that are perceived as a threat by families and community.

Expanding the picture to bring the dominant culture into view brings into question the familiar narrative of assimilation as a one-way process that refugees must struggle towards. Such a narrative makes settlement a refugee problem, and problems encountered in settling are seen as refugee pathology. Yet if both cultures are engaged in defending something, then a two-way process is always in train, and the problem is clearly a larger one.
More deconstructive work needed to happen around culture. The process of bringing the dominant culture into view had the advantage of making visible the invisible, but had the disadvantage of emphasising a fixedness and solidity about both cultures. We wanted to deconstruct such notions. We felt we could perhaps achieve this by asking participants to describe their own cultural heritage and its characteristics. This opened the way to identifying the intersections and overlapping of cultures that has occurred through migrations and intermarriage, and through juxtapositions with others. We were also able to draw from participants a depiction of the prevailing institutional culture and get them to position themselves in relation to it. Acknowledging ourselves as diversely situated in relation to what operates as culture through Australian institutions facilitates engagement with the plurality of positions encountered at the cultural borders.

To assert that culture is not a single unified system, but rather a number of cultures that are messy and ragged, and which intersect and overlap each other and have leaky boundaries, is not to devalue culture. Rather, against the notion that culture is fixed, we can assert that culture is always changing. Against the notion that culture is always changing, we can assert that there is something enduring in every culture. People can be found across the whole spectrum of cultural claims. No youth worker, whatever their ethnicity, can claim to speak for their culture, for people of their culture will be diversely positioned. No young person from Sudan will completely identify with Western culture, no matter how much the elders and parents fear this to be possible. No Australian can ask the newcomer to respect Australian culture, as if somehow there were a knowable, fixed, identifiable thing to be respected. Every person feels the pull of their culture, but each will experience and respond to it uniquely, depending on their circumstance.

Between culture as unified and culture as dynamic, there are lines of force which bring different pressures to bear on, and between, persons. Bhabha (1994) speaks of hybridity as a strategy for unsettling the fiction created by clear boundaries, a one-way gaze and privileged terms. Young people quickly adopt hybrid identities, yet how does this differ from assimilation and acculturation? The key is that assimilation and acculturation maintain the false narrative of one-way passage, therefore protecting the privileged entity, whereas hybridity disrupts this.

We invited participants to consider threads of common ground with specific reference to the scenario. Participants readily identified some commonalities, including tensions between families and young people; fear that young people may be lost to their families and culture; and young people who need space to work things out and who seek acceptance by other young people where they live, work and go to school. Also, all people, wherever they are born, who make their lives in Australia, have in common a relationship, albeit from different positions, to the prevailing institutions. We had deconstructed just enough to allow participants to clearly see the challenges in more complex terms.

We were edging towards a shift from seeing the conflict between elders and young people in terms of individual or cultural pathologies to seeing it within a social and broader political framework that implicates us all, whatever our ethnicity, age or gender. How to express this insight in action was a question remaining to be addressed.

In the previous session, we had come to a point where dialogue was a strategy for moving forward. Here it seemed a practitioner committed to dialogue may construct the task as one of brokering dialogue between the elders and the young people. This is a good start, but still conceals the dominant culture, and contributes to the illusion that the new community has the problem and the established community does not. A different possibility is to recognise the scale of social upheaval, which includes us all and the difficulties all families are having in transmitting their various values to their young people in the face of fluid, materialistic and highly seductive global forces. Establishing dialogue around this in ways that bring together members of different communities who have this concern in common would be another possible approach. It may surprise but reassure...
the parents and elders of the settling community to know that parents and young people in the established community share some of their fears and tensions. Such a joining in dialogue may help different communities know themselves and each other differently.

Conclusion

Deconstruction, as discussed in this paper, is a means of shifting familiar thinking that underpins both practice and thought. It opens some space for thinking and doing otherwise. However, it does not prescribe or indicate what should happen in that space. We have tended to try to hold the space long enough to consider whether the conversations which happen there could be more inclusive of a wider range of people. In even making a suggestion of dialogue as a means of engagement at that point, we overstep the deconstructive intentions of the paper. Yet, we have done this deliberately, because our own efforts at dialogue between refugee and other communities have brought people together on new ground and facilitated a surprising readiness to give and take.

Dialogue, of course, is a project, both practical and political, and it has all the pitfalls of any project. People use force on themselves and each other in all sorts of covert, unconscious and inherited ways, and this plays out through dialogue no matter how good the intention. Dialogue, then is not some new interpersonal process based on honesty and integrity, it is rather a framework to connect people who are usually held apart by power dynamics so as to open the possibility for some rearrangement of those dynamics. Mouffe (2000) uses the term agonistic pluralism to suggest that pluralised worlds will require of us all that we hold tension, engage across difference, and live with much that we cannot control. Agonism works with the tensions which antagonism collapses into polarity. Western modes of thought have not equipped us too well for this approach, which is why deconstruction might help.

Our efforts to approach training from a deconstructive perspective are a response to the neoliberal versus social justice binary. While social justice informs our political aims, it can lock us into modes of thinking and acting that are not necessarily strategic in the current context. Deconstruction interrupts master narratives and limiting thought patterns. It shifts the matrix, and opens new spaces, but does not provide direction for practice. Deconstruction opened spaces in the workshops, interrupting familiar practice analyses and methods.

In the spaces created by deconstruction, getting people to talk with each other presented as the first option, not to eliminate difference but to bring it to the surface, so as to situate ourselves differently around it. The binaries of Western thought, where the gaze and critique are fixed on the other worker’s ideology, the other person’s pathology and the other culture’s struggle, falter under the deconstructive gaze. Deconstruction is a particular logic, and on its own not a means of changing the world; however, as one logic among others, it has a particular quality for those of us concerned about divisiveness in a pluralising world.

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