Non-traditional Students in Tertiary Education: Inter-disciplinary Collaboration in Curriculum and Pedagogy in Community Services Education in Australia.

Abstract

Education policy in Australia has accelerated its aim to increase participation of under-represented groups in tertiary education including students who are culturally and linguistically diverse and have low socio-economic status (DEEWR 2009). These students generally have not had prior access to privileged academic discourse, which can further disadvantage them in their participation and progress in tertiary education. In this article, we outline a cross-discipline curriculum initiative and pedagogy that draws on critical literacy and the metaphor of discourse community to integrate language and academic skills into community services qualifications. We argue that this - supports the genuine participation of under-represented (non-traditional) students. It aspires to not only support students' entry into the new academic terrain, but to enable students to adopt a critical stance to the discourses in which they are learning to participate. This we argue is crucial, when expertise is not just a way of meeting its ostensible purposes, but is also a way of exercising power. Although we report on the application of this initiative to entry level curricula (Diploma), we suggest that it has relevance and application to Bachelor levels in a range of disciplines, both in supporting pedagogy and for transition to Bachelor level study.

Introduction

'*A curriculum centred on the knowledge of dominant groups does not serve the needs of socially diverse polities*' (Gundara & Sharma 2010: 93).

'Inclusive education' has become a global movement in recent times (Kozleski & Waitoller, 2001). This movement is in response to equity concerns for students who are perceived as different by educational systems, as well as the growing demands of a market economy and the interests of economic growth (Lambert, 2009). 'Inclusive education' has been conceptualised by Booth (2000: 1) as a rights-based process of 'increasing participation and decreasing exclusion from the culture, curriculum and community of mainstream

(education)'. It has generated significant scholarship on the implications for pedagogy and policy (Trifonas 2003; Gray 2007; Gale 2007).

Propelled by the drive for economic growth, the Australian government now has an explicit social inclusion policy in tertiary education. This includes targets for increased participation in post-compulsory education by students from less representative groups, such as low socio-economic status (SES), indigenous, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and people with disabilities (DEEWR 2009). Macfarlane (2010) has questioned the prevailing political rhetoric on social inclusion, suggesting that the tendency to prescribe and categorize what constitutes an 'ethical citizen', with its implied aspirations for 'participation', can produce an inclusion/exclusion binary. This in itself can situate particular citizens outside systemic participation, and unhelpfully contribute to social and systemic discourses of inclusion/exclusion.

As educators in an inner city, dual sector university in the west of Melbourne (Australia), we continually grapple with the moral, political and intellectual challenges of genuinely 'inclusive education'. We teach in an Australian university with high levels of students represented from both low socioeconomic status groups and non English speaking backgrounds (Messinis et al, 2008). The majority of students in the University come from families in the bottom half of Melbourne's socio-economic distribution. Many of these students speak languages other than English at home, which complicates their educational opportunities (Messinis et al, 2008). In the process of getting to know these students, we learn that many have struggled against considerable odds in their lives, be it as single parents, survivors of bleak domestic situations, or sometimes harsh and traumatic journeys from other parts of the world.

Not defeated by the events of their lives, they characteristically seek ways to make a contribution to the community in their vocational choices. In our experience, Community Development and Social Work often attract such students in this pursuit, because of its inherent values and commitment to community well-being (AASW, 2010). The potential of these students, given their experiences and cultural diversity, is enormous. Aware of Moll, Gonzalez, and Amaniti's (2005) attention to marginalised students' *funds of knowledge* in designing pedagogy, we wanted to capture this potential rather than exclude it. *Funds of knowledge* refer to the knowledge and skills used over generations to support family well-being, which can be obscured in the education process of marginalised students. In an

Australian study, Hattam et al (2007) illustrate how *funds of knowledge* can be engaged in pedagogy by finding points of connection between students' everyday lives and their learning experience. Our intention was to harness this intersection between the familiar world of the non-traditional student and the unfamiliar world of academia and disciplinary knowledge in which they're entering, to create a clear framework to support this transition. This article describes the curriculum developed in response to the unrealised potential of non-traditional students, who may have found themselves 'situated outside systemic participation' in the tertiary education context. The distinctive features of this curriculum were formed through the collaboration of community services and language and learning educators. The following aspects will be outlined:

- the cross-faculty, professional collaboration;

- underpinning theoretical constructs;

- reframing of deficit views of non-traditional students;

- the explicit attention to language features of the discipline discourse.

- the teaching of a 'critical stance' and

- the embedding of language and academic skills into the curriculum design.

It is suggested that this curriculum and pedagogy has application across a range of Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) levels and discipline contexts. It has particular relevance in the current momentum of Government education policy, which reflects broader trends outside Australia (Ball, 1998).

Challenges for Students and Educators

Anecdotally, both educators and learners of entry level community services and community development courses are sometimes daunted by the distance non-traditional students must travel, not only in order to complete a Diploma, but to work constructively in the Community Services field (inclusive of Community Development in this paper) and to take up expanding opportunities to enter Higher Education. These learning challenges are often expressed in the difficulties students have in meeting the complex reading and writing demands of the Diploma courses. This is not just the students for whom English is a second, third or fourth language, but also by native English speakers. Many of these students do not have the academic discourse skills that people from more privileged educational backgrounds can have. Wheelahan (2010) refers to the socially differentiated access to knowledge and

education that arises when some students have the privilege of congruence between their middle class home and education environments and others don't. Linguists have analysed the impact of class on linguistic structures that people use and there is some acknowledgement of consistent linguistic practices related to class in everyday speech (McIntosh, 2003; Labov, 1972). It is possible that these factors impact on the linguistic resources that some non-traditional students bring to the complex reading and writing expectations of tertiary education.

Independent Academic Reading and Writing Skills

Providing a realistic means for non-traditional students to meaningfully access discipline and academic discourse, whilst learning and absorbing the often demanding and challenging concepts integral to community services education, became the challenge for us as educators. It is apparent through student progress, results, attrition and feedback from both higher education and the community services industry, that many of these students' participation and successful transition from graduation into the workforce, as well as accessing higher education, is constrained. Traditional support for these students has been through adjunct language and academic support courses or services. In our experience, whilst this has sometimes enabled students to pass at Diploma level, students have relied on these services to graduate, but do not necessarily have sufficient independent written language skills to function well in the workplace or in Higher Education. Also, even though some students meet the competency standards through these means, it is questionable whether they have the requisite disciplinary knowledge that we consider necessary for effective application in the professional context. This echoes concerns expressed by Wheelahan (2010: 5) that curriculum in vocational education has retreated from theoretical, disciplinary knowledge to more immediately applicable skills and contextualised knowledge of specific industry contexts. She maintains that access to theoretical knowledge is central to democratic participation in society, because it provides access to 'society's conversation about itself' (p.2). She further argues that disciplinary knowledge provides understanding of boundaries around other forms of knowledge, ultimately related to distributional justice.

Our aim was to develop a curriculum and pedagogy that built independent academic reading and writing skills for non-traditional students which gave them greater access to privileged

disciplinary knowledge. Somewhat ambitiously, we wanted this pedagogy to also enable students to develop a critical stance in relation to their own formation – to develop critical agency - when this was not part of their initial cultural lens (Northedge, 2005). Recognising education as a 'political act' (Freire,1970), we sought to design a curriculum that encouraged students to become reflective participants of the expertise they learnt and the systems they would inevitably enter in their working lives.

Collaboration Becomes Critical

The curriculum we developed was through the intensive collaboration of community services and specialist language and learning educators, drawing on concepts from critical literacy (Lankshear and McClaren 1993, Lankshear 1997) and the metaphor of a discourse community (Ivanic 2004). Whilst all were experienced educators, the community services teachers recognised that they were not experts in language and learning development, which it was becoming increasingly apparent, was required. The language and learning teachers recognised that high level language and academic learning could not be learnt in isolation from participation in a discipline, but the language teacher could not substitute for the discipline educators. The writers collaboratively drew on and relied on the expertise of the other, to develop and teach a program that knitted together knowledge learning and language learning, workplace knowledge and workplace communication, the beginnings of critique and critical literacy; a program which, while in its infancy, seems a promising step in meeting the challenges faced by non-traditional students.

In the collaboration, the community service educators articulated to the language teachers how sociology could serve students in the community services diplomas, the community services field and for allied higher education degrees. The centrality of enabling and encouraging students to question situations or established courses of action, which might seem natural, taken for granted, routine or beyond question was established. In the sociology unit, this was to be achieved by providing an historical and social context to current social realities (and students' and others'experiences of that reality) with multiple theoretical perspectives from sociology. Students learn that the world is open to competing interpretations. While this capacity for questioning, reflection and reinterpretation of situations is important for further study, it is also crucial for work in the community services

field, where policies and practices are underpinned by such theories, and where critical analysis and reflection underpin working life. The aim is that students learn sociology as a resource to be drawn upon to re-imagine and respond creatively to issues as community service workers.

The Intersection of Familiar and Unfamiliar Worlds

For many students from different cultural backgrounds and social experiences, this runs counter to their values, experience and language (mediating discourse) and is an awesome and sometimes onerous journey (Northedge, 2005). This has been evidenced particularly in the written texts in sociology (and other related units) and it has often been difficult to tease out whether the challenges were 'linguistic', 'conceptual', 'cultural' or all of the above. Breault and Lack (2009) maintain that learners mediate their learning through two cultural lenses: the habits, experiences and interpretive perspectives that they bring with them, due to their cultural and historic biographies and the cultural community in which they are situated. Williams (2006) explores the challenges of less traditional students using Bourdieu's (1984) concept of 'habitus' - the way we all internalise and normalise the beliefs and values of the community and social class to which we tell ourselves we belong. If we move from one 'habitus' to another, we have to learn new social practices, including discourses, and the new values often conflict with the old. The struggles of these students and their educators required careful reflection; we wanted to identify dimensions of power and privilege embedded in curriculum that possibly excluded less traditional students.

Underpinning Theoretical Constructs

To this reflection, the language teachers brought the metaphor of a *discourse community*, a term now widespread in the language and learning field (Ivanic and Simpson, 1992, Martin and Rose, 2008; Martin and White 2005; McCormack, 2002) and familiar to many constructs in community services. The term 'discourse' in this context refers to certain ways of using language, acting, interacting, behaving, believing and so forth that characterise a particular community (Allie et al 2009). Through the use of the characteristics of a discourse, we can recognise ourselves and others as belonging to a community. The notion of *identity* is therefore central; for being in a discourse community implies taking on an identity as a

member of that community – how you present yourself to the world and how the world recognises you (Gee 2009).

This is reflected in socio-cultural theories of learning, which focus on the social dimensions of learning (Wenger, 1998; Wells and Claxton, 2002); it sits on Sfard's (1998) theory of learning continuum as the *participation* perspective, with *acquisition* at the other end of the spectrum. The participation perspective views learning as an ongoing process of participation, of becoming a member of a community, and therefore developing a particular identity within that community. The acquisition perspective at the other end, sees learning as the acquisition of 'knowledge', with an end point (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In participatory learning, knowledge is recast to include the shared values, identities, conventions, and practices of members of a discourse community.

Reframing Deficit Perspectives

This concept of a discourse community enabled us to reframe the problems in student writing as an issue of identity within the discourse communities of both sociology and academic writing. Rather than focusing on students' grammatical 'mistakes' and reinforcing deficit discourses about students' literacy and language (Comber & Kamler, 2004), non-traditional students can be repositioned as emerging participants in a new (not necessarily 'better') discourse. From the perspective of curriculum design, learning can be framed as a movement from the discourse communities that students previously inhabited, to membership in a new discourse community, in this case, sociology and academia. It enabled the writers to frame the curriculum as a sequence of activities through which new identities are taken up, as the ways of performing the identities of members of a discourse community.

Explicit attention to Language features of the Discourse

Explicit attention to the language features of the new discourse supported this process. Through strategic analysis of specific language features of the new discourse, students are given the resources to more readily participate in the new discourse. Rai (2004, 2006) encourages the making of writing practices explicit in social work education to support the

7

participation of non-traditional students. She advocates for students and educators to identify the specific writing conventions required in the discourse of the social work discipline and embedding these skills in the education process. This is essentially what we did, as further outlined below.

The Teaching of a Critical Stance

However, we could also see the possibilities this approach held in encouraging the development of a critical stance. The metaphor of a discourse community can encompass competing perspectives, making possible a conversation amongst educators and students about the significance and value of the new discourse. Learning how this knowledge is actively made and remade as communication/language and learning, and how to make and remake it oneself, also contributes to making the new discourse not a final authority, but a resource always open to judicious use and further question. This explicit recognition that the discourse is not the final authority reinforces the notion of questioning what is presented to us and valuing our own reflective responses. Drawing on Freire's (1970) notions of critical pedagogy, it creates a further space where dimensions of power and privilege can be explored with students. Questions can be raised about the relationship between the different discourse communities students inhabit, more readily exposing avenues of access to the discourse of choice. Students can be encouraged to appreciate that learning new identities does not annul but somehow enters into a complex relationship with the identities that they bring to the course.

The Curriculum Structure and Design

The structure for the curriculum development involved two units of the Diplomas of Community Services and Community Development (which were jointly delivered in the first year) – 'Sociology' (CHCLD514A   Analyse impacts of sociological factors on clients in community work and services) and in 'Communications' (CHCCOM504A Develop, implement and promote effective workplace communication and CHCCD515A Communicate effectively within a Community Development context). In our experience, Sociology is a subject which typifies the kind of disciplinary knowledge that poses real difficulties for non-traditional students; both because of the nature of the knowledge to which

students are introduced, and the new reading and writing demands involved in communicating that disciplinary knowledge. It was reasoned that, if our pedagogic 'intervention' could make a difference here, students would be well served to meet the challenges of the rest of the Diploma and beyond.

Whilst the community services educators were somewhat constrained by the competency based units, which in general terms defined performance, they could identify key elements related to oral and written communication and build curriculum (content, knowledge, assessment and teaching and learning processes) around this defined performance. This curriculum was then published (internally) for future application, review and development.

In practice, the language teacher taught the elements of written and oral communication in the communications unit, drawing on content, concepts, and tasks from the sociology unit, to model to students the reading and writing practices in both disciplinary and professoinal settings. The community services educator taught the other discipline related components of that unit. The relevant community services educator taught sociology, whilst the language teacher was drawing on the oral and written communication components of the communication unit, to enable students to successfully undertake the assessment tasks in sociology. In addition, an Academic Research Unit was imported into the Diploma as a designated elective in the following semester, where academic skills were explored, using the concepts and content of the sociology discipline. Additional English language assistance was provided through partial co-delivery by English Language teachers throughout the units.

Integral to the program were the assessment tasks set in the sociology unit, resulting from the collaboration between language and community services teachers. Not only would they be the cornerstones of what counted as sociological knowledge, but they would shape those activities in the units that focused on academic skills. This enabled the efficient and detailed building of language and academic skills, explicit attention to language features of the discipline, strengthening of sociology knowledge and assessments, as well as covering essential content required for the units of competencies.

The result of bringing together the teaching of sociology with the metaphor of sociology as a discourse community, was our design of the sociology unit as a stepped sequence of activities and assessment tasks, enabling students to become participants in the discipline; to 'try on'

the identity of a sociologist.[1] Cross-discipline collaboration has enabled the values, essential terms and privileged identities of the discourse to be identified and put into curricular sequences. The curriculum initially provides opportunities for students to understand the sociological theories by applying them in various foci of analysis - in their own lives, in a short story, and in case studies. Then students are invited to compare the theories and their different 'takes' on sociological issues. Finally, students evaluate each theory in the light of the others. The materials have been sequenced in ways which enable students to more easily make the transition, or transformation into the privileged identities of the discipline.

Early Indications of Student Success

The curriculum model has received enthusiastic, anecdotal feedback from students and educators. The results of the final, summative comparative essay in the sociology unit, whilst speculative at this stage, possibly present a hopeful picture for the students who participated. In the first year of the program, not all the students in the 'sociology' unit were enrolled in the 'communications' unit, so those who did not participate provided us with some comparison. From the final sociology essay results of 34 students, all *high distinction* essays, 75 percent of *distinction* essays, 72 percent of *credit* essays, and 50 percent of *pass* essays were written by the students participating in the embedded English language and academic skills program: no students who participated in the pilot course were required to resubmit. These were marked by discipline teachers; some of whom would have known which students participated in the writing course and others who didn't. This anecdotal feedback and small speculative sample requires further research to establish to what extent non-traditional students are progressed toward their educational goals and effective participation in the workplace through such an intervention.

Conclusion

This curriculum initiative aspires to enable students to adopt a critical stance to the discourses in which they are learning to participate. It is a very different approach to that of seeing acquisition of disciplinary knowledge and expertise as an induction into an operationally closed, autonomous region, which can sustain the illusion that successful students exit their

---

[1] [1] Specific examples of these stepped activities are available in Moraitis, Carr and Daddow (2012) 'Developing and Sustaining New Pedagogies: a Case for Embedding Language, Literacy and Academic Skills in Vocational Education Curriculum' - Forthcoming.

Final version

other discourses and identities as they learn to assume the role of expert. Lillis (2001:36) writes that non-traditional students 'often most strongly experience a sense of dissonance with prevailing practices' and can expose 'both the nature of such discourse practices and their ideological force'. The 'dissonance' that non-traditional students can experience, is a pivotal place to explore a curriculum and pedagogy that might enable a transformation of this experience of dissonance and estrangement, into critical awareness. A curriculum and pedagogy that aims to maximise the genuine participation of a diverse range of students in tertiary education, harnessing their potential to transition effectively into higher education or the community services profession, ultimately reflects core principles of the profession into which they are being inducted; this highlights both its imperative and power.

Acknowledgements

Note

1. Specific examples of these stepped activities are available in Moraitis, Carr and Daddow (2012).

References:

Allie, S. M., Armien, N.Burgoyne, J. Case, B. Collier-Reed, T. Craig, A. Deacon, M. Duncan, D. Marshall, D. Mogashana, C. Shaw, G. Sheridan, N, Wolmarans. 2009. Learning as acquiring a discursive identity through participation in a community: improving student learning in engineering education. *European Journal of Engineering Education* 34, no. 4: 359-367.

Australian Association of Social Workers, *Code of Ethics*, http://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/740, accessed 11th April, 2011

Ball, S. 1998. Big Policies/Small World; An introduction to international perspectives in education policy. *Comparative Education,* 34, no. 2:119-130.

Booth, T., Ainscow, M., Black-Hawkins, K., Vaughan, M., and Shaw, L. 2000. *The Index for Inclusion.* London: Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education.

Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste,* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Breault, R. & Lack, B. 2009. Equity and empowerment in PDS work: A Review of literature (1999 to 2006). *Equity and Excellence in Education* 42: 152-68.

Comber, B. & Barbara Kamler .2004. Getting out of Deficit: Pedagogies of reconnection. *Teacher Education,* 15, no. 3: 293-310.

Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations. 2009. *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*, Canberra: Commonwealth Government.

Freire, P. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Gale, T. 2007. *Engaging Teachers,* UK: McGraw-Hill International

Gee, J. 2009. Identity without identification. In *Why Writing Matters: Issues of access and identity in writing research and pedagogy,* ed. A. Carter, T. Lillis and S. Parkin, 45-46. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.

Gray, B. 2007. *Accelerating the Literacy Development of Indigenous Students*, Charles Darwin University Press, Darwin.

Gundara, J. & N. Sharma. 2010. Providing Access to Education: Intercultural and Knowledge Issues in the Curriculum. In *Changing Educational Landscapes,* ed. Mattheou, 93-105. Dordrecht: Springer.

Hattam, R., B. Lucas, B. Prosser, & S. Sellar. 2007. Researching the 'funds of knowledge' approach in the Middle Years, *The World of Educational Quality,* 2007 AERA Annual Meeting and Presentation, Chicago.

Ivanic, R. & J. Simpson, 1992. Who's who in Academic Writing? in *Critical Language Awareness,* ed. N. Fairclough, ch. 6, 141-73, Longman: London.

Kozleski, E. & F. Waitoller. 2010. Teacher learning for inclusive education: understanding teaching as a cultural and political practice. *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 14, no. 7: 655-666.

Labov, W. 1972. *Language in the Inner City,* University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

Lambert, C. 2009. Pedagogies of participation in higher education: a case for research-based learning. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* 17, no. 3: 295-309.

Lankshear, C. 1997. *Changing Literacies,* Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Lankshear. C., P. McLaren, (eds). 1993. *Critical literacy: politics, praxis, and the postmodern*, NY: State University of New York Press.

Lave, J. & E. Wenger. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation.* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK.

Lillis, T. 2001. *Student writing: access, regulation, desire,* Routledge, New York.

Martin, J. & D. Rose. 2008. *Genre relations: mapping culture,* Equinox, London.

Martin J. and R. White, 2005. *The language of evaluation: appraisal in English*, Palgrave McMillan, Houndmills Basingstok.

Mcfarlane, K. 2010. Social Inclusion Policy: Producing justice or retribution? *Journal of Social Inclusion* 1, no. 2: 133-150.

McCormack, R. 2002. *Learning to learn: the next step: teaching adults how to read and write the academic discourse.* Melbourne: Language Australia for Victoria University.

McIntosh, D. 2003. Declining into Silence: The Language of the Workingman. Literary Honours Thesis, Victoria University, October.

Messinis, G, Sheehan, P & Miholcic, Z. 2008. *The Diversity and Performance of the Student Population at Victoria University: A Preliminary Analysis,* Centre for Strategic Economic Studies, Victoria University, Melbourne.

Moll,L., N.Gonzalez, & C. Amanti. 2005. *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households and Classrooms*, Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Moraitis, P., Carr, A. A. Daddow. 2012. Developing and Sustaining new pedagogies: A case for embedding language, literacy and academic skills in vocational education curriculum. *International Journal of Educational Research* 10, no. 1: 58-72.

Northedge, A. 2005. Rethinking teaching in the context of diversity: supporting social participation in a knowledge community. In *Tertiary Teaching & Learning: Dealing with Diversity,* ed. G. Shaw, 13-31. Australia: Charles Darwin University Press.

Rai, L. 2004. Exploring Literacy in Social Work Education: A Social Practices Approach to student Writing. *Social Work Education* 23, no. 2: 149-162.

Rai, L. 2006. Owning (up to) Reflective Writing in Social Work Education. *Social Work Education* 25, no. 8:. 785-797.

Sfard, A. 1998. On two metaphors for learning and the dangers of choosing just one. *Educational Researcher* 27, no 2: 4-13.

Trifonas, P. (ed) 2003. *Pedagogies of Difference: Rethinking education for social change.* New York, US: Falmer.

Wells, G., and Claxton. (2002). *Learning for life in the 21st Century: Sociocultural perspectives on the future of education.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Final version

Wheelahan, L. 2010. *Why Knowledge Matters in Curriculum,* London and New York: Routledge.

Williams, B. 2006. Home and Away: The Tensions of Community, Literacy, and Identity. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 49, no. 4: 342 – 347.

Final version