

‘Hearing the Country’: Reflexivity as an Intimate Journey into Epistemological Liminalities

John Bradley

Monash Indigenous Centre, Faculty of Arts, Monash University, Australia

In this article I discuss the way Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and reflexivity is employed in a university environment to address the question of how we can most successfully transfer knowledge about the presumed Other into our own cultural space without reducing, fragmenting, and exoticising complex knowledge systems. My goal is to stimulate in students an awareness of, and empathic engagement with, Indigenous epistemologies and Indigenous perspectives on environment, other species, moral ecology and cultural and commercial activities undertaken on Country. In this article I focus on one particular course in which I use ethnographic scenarios as learning triggers for weekly workshops to provide a multi-sensorial and experiential style of learning. Topics range from the construction of ethnoclassificatory systems to the construction of kinship as an expression of moral ontological frameworks. The process draws on over 30 years experience working with the Yanyuwa families of the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria in the Northern Territory. Central to the success of the course are the *li-Yanyuwa li-Wirdiwalangu* (Yanyuwa knowledge holders), a core group of senior men and women who play an active daily role in the maintenance and dissemination of Yanyuwa knowledge systems, increasingly a site of their own empowerment. In consultation with Bradley, they have selected and annotated core ethnographic information which I have then developed into PBL triggers for the course.

■ **Keywords:** knowledge, Yanyuwa, epistemology, reflexivity, liminality

This article reveals the means by which students from various disciplines at Monash University explore the relationship between themselves as reflexive learners and the knowledge systems in which they are embedded, and other knowledge systems to which the course AT2359/3359 ‘Hearing the Country’ exposes them. In this course, the question is placed as to whether it is possible to contextualise Indigenous ontology and epistemology into a Western classroom setting, and if so how best can we most successfully transfer knowledge about the presumed Other into our own cultural space without reducing, fragmenting, and exoticising complex knowledge systems or reducing complex ways of knowing to simple, but well worn, tags such as IK (Indigenous Knowledge) or TEK (Indigenous Ecological Knowledge; see Berkes, 1999). In this article I am choosing to define Problem-Based Learning (PBL) as a situation where students learn to explore a problem using their own apperception, or their own prior knowledge and understanding; they then analyse the contents of the various scenarios to formulate various hypotheses that might assist in explaining the initial problem. Thus in PBL, students may not always be able to learn all the material, but they can learn how to learn the mate-

rial. The PBL structure teaches students to be group and self-orientated, independent and interdependent learners who are motivated to work towards solving a problem.

Through the use of PBL, I create a liminal space following on from Turner (1982), who suggests that it is within the liminal space existing between structure and situation that the space of greatest invention is created. Thus, discovery, creativity and reflection come to the fore as ways of learning. However, care is also required, because from my own experiences in teaching into such a space it can at times be ambiguous and also for some a destructive place where students sometimes do not cope without the ‘normal’ academic supports of formal lecture and Power-Point. It is also important to note that Bakhtin (1981) is useful here in describing the liminal space as one that can defy the norms and offer new and different connections between students and lecturer; however, there also has to be an awareness that roles and status can never really be

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: John Bradley, Monash Indigenous Centre, Faculty of Arts, Monash University, Clayton VIC 3806, Australia. Email: john.bradley@monash.edu

eliminated and, of course, after the classes they can return. In addition there is another issue where students can be left adrift in the 'liminal space'. However, this scenario has never really occurred, in part due to the way students are 'held' in the class and the emphasis placed on reflexive writing and how my response to those reflexive writings is also a reflexive response, which then leads to a 'journeying conversation' throughout the semester.

To this end, in trying to construct a space in between, I have been privileged and fortunate that the *Yanyuwa* families of the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria in the Northern Territory have been fearless in their openness and willingness to work with aspects of outside cultures in an attempt to demonstrate as much as is possible the fabric and value of their own identity and Law. They have made three award winning films: *Two Laws* (Strachan, Cavadini, with the Borroloola Aboriginal community, 1981); *Buwarrala Akarriya — Journey East* (Sonnenberg, 1989); and *Ka-Wayawayama — Aeroplane Dance* (Graham, 1994); and more recently, a suite of nine animations incorporating narratives and song lines (Bradley & Devlin Glass, 2010; Kearney, 2011). They have also developed a website in collaboration with academics from The University of Queensland, Deakin University, Monash University, and the Australian National University. The site (<http://www.deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/diwurruwuru/>) is part of a process of self-representation and education (see Bradley, Devlin Glass, & Mackinlay, 1999). The focus material used in the classes are developed with the *Yanyuwa* families, and they choose what they consider suitable and valuable as vehicles for cross-cultural instruction. The materials are based on real-life situations experienced by members of the *Yanyuwa* families and myself. The material has been gathered during the course of a 32-year collaboration between the *Yanyuwa* families and myself, which continues to this day.

I have also had powerful experiences as the Other in both national and international contexts (Australia, Africa, Israel, Europe, Tibet). In the process of mentoring students into the liminal space created by PBL and managing the emotional and intellectual landscapes of disorientation, bewilderment, provocation and dislocation, I draw on these experiences in a discursive manner. In doing so, I attempt to break through formal veneers surrounding the performance of the role of instructor in the university environment in a particularly intimate way. To disclose elements of the self requires the investment of a degree of trust in the students on our part. I believe that by investing trust in the students I introduce them to a system that one of our students has called 'guided freedom'. The statement below is illustrative of the kind of feedback that this course routinely stimulates:

I think that the 'unexpected' is what I have faced for the majority of this course. I have attended classes not certain of what will happen and I leave with different emotions every time. This

unexpectedness has caught me off guard. It is like the wind that creeps up on me, not knowing which direction it will blow me ... (Student journal, 2011)

Structuring the Course for Student Engagement

I deliver the course over a 12-week university semester in 2-hour blocks each week to approximately 60 students. The delivery style involves one 2-hour 'whole-of-class' classical PBL session (see, e.g., Schmidt, 1983). Students are expected to prepare for each week's class by reading a number of articles that have both a broad and sometimes specific relationship to the PBL exercise. The designated weekly readings comprise articles describing scenarios that parallel, echo, challenge, or respond to similar problems to those students face in the whole-of-class session. While the selected authors are of diverse cultural and epistemological origins, most of the sites described in the articles are of Indigenous Australian scientific practice and methodological contexts, though several describe equivalent non-Australian Indigenous cultural milieu.

During the first whole-of-class session, students are provided with an orientation to the history of Western scientific and philosophical thinking in which they are first introduced to the notion that their beliefs about how they know the world are culturally derived despite being presented so often as true and factual accounts of the nature of the world. I also expose the idea of the university as a cultural product of that same history and in particular Levinas' (1992, p. 148) notion of 'the violence of categories' is very useful as a point of discussion. This orientation is the only formal lecture in the course and following it, each whole-of-class session focuses on a specific scenario drawn from my own field experience with the *Yanyuwa* families. These scenarios involve relations between Indigenous peoples and their Country, and usually reveal tensions that arise based on different conceptions of, or management strategies relating to, the environment and its position both ontologically and epistemologically.

I briefly orientate students to the week's scenario, providing primary historic background and relevant detail. I present students with their task and the time available to them in which to achieve it. I distribute a range of relevant materials amongst students who form groups of five or six. Some of the PBL trigger materials used in this class have become well known amongst the student body, and is one of the ways students recruit themselves and friends into the class.

The triggers used comprise various materials that have been collected or generated by the collaboration. They often include materials that are commonplace to some classrooms such as paper, but they also include material that is seen by many students as utterly exotic. They include cultural maps of specific elements of *Yanyuwa* land and/or sea; verses of culturally significant songs

accompanied by sketched transects of the relevant country described in the verses; a variety of skeletal specimens; various ethnographic artefacts, including fish hooks and dugong and turtle harpoons; and in relation to ethno-classification, even Yowie[©] toys (which are chocolate eggs that could be purchased from various retailers in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These eggs contained quite life-like Australian birds, mammals, reptiles and fish which are excellent teaching tools as the figures are three dimensional, colourful and therefore students find them attractive to work with). For some, the collections of skeletal material are shocking; the objects may smell or have a waxy appearance, indicating their recent inclusion in the collection, or the skulls of feral cats and crocodiles may be the stuff of nightmares for some individuals. Similarly, the distribution of hundreds of tiny and colourful toy animals and birds can confuse students utterly. However, all trigger materials stimulate emotional and intellectual responses in terms of the self, and the relevance of self to their understanding and construction of the Other.

It is beyond the scope of this article to detail the weekly trigger material. However, Figure 1 is an example of the trigger material used which is relatively short and demonstrates the kind of intimate material that members of the *Yanyuwa* families encourage the use of in the class. The students are all given a copy of this scenario and in groups work through the information and begin to work through their understandings as to what the information might represent. I use the information contained in Figure 1 in the latter part of the semester as it brings together a number of issues, which we treat as separate components in earlier classes such as language, kinship, negotiation, and apprehension in relation to the lived experience on Country.

In particular this PBL scenario leads into discussion centred on the understanding that for many Indigenous people management of country is more than just what the West might term 'land management'. This PBL introduces students to the understanding of the use of language and speech as a way of engaging emotionally with 'Country' as a form of management. The speaker stresses issues of kinship and relatedness as an important way of knowing country, and through this her authority is demonstrated. Understandings of relatedness are extended through to non-human kin such as the galahs that are feeding in the distance. The understanding of 'lifting up Country' is a way that people talk about their emotional engagement with place. There are issues also about the power of Indigenous languages to speak to a listening country, and among some Indigenous people there is debate as to whether English can achieve this.

The PBL also contains references to chewing tobacco and white ash derived from the burnt bark of coolabah trees; this really has no relevance to the actual PBL, but is included because it happened, but experience with the PBL has shown that students think this is important and

Tobacco and Long Necked Turtles

(An extract from field notes August 1996) She sat by the fire, watching carefully the long necked turtles that were cooking in the ashes. The sun had not yet risen but already it was warm. She reached for her tobacco tin, taking some out; she placed it into in her mouth and began to chew. After a short moment she took the tobacco out and, opening another tin she mixed the tobacco with a white powder-like substance. She then put the tobacco back into her mouth. She looked across at her son who was also sitting by the fire and said, 'I'm nearly out of tobacco, you'll have to buy me some more tomorrow when we go to town'. She reached for her digging stick and turned the long necked turtles, and recovered them with the ashes. She then stood up crying out loudly, 'Wayi! Mili ngandarra barra? Marnajingarna rra-ardu ki-awarawu, karna-yirdardi marnaji, ngarna barra a-wirriyarra, ngarna-nganji ki-awarawu. Mili ngandarra barra? Jina barra murndangu buyi barra! buyi! Ngarna-nyngkarriya! Barni-ngalngandaya barra!' (Hey what is happening here? I am here a child of this country, my spirit is from here, I am a kinsperson to this country. What is happening? This long necked turtle is small, too small! Listen to me! Do not pretend not to know me!) She then sat down looked across to her son and said, 'Don't forget my tobacco tomorrow!' He nodded his head and they both sat in silence watching the sunrise. She noticed her son watching a group of galahs gathered on nearby plain, she said very matter of factly, 'Anda barra nyanku-nganji ki-awarawu, namba kurdardi alunga, janda-kanji ankaya, janda-rinkirinkimanji awara' (She is a kinswoman to this country, she carries it, she lifts it up when we are not here).

FIGURE 1

An Example of Trigger Material used in PBL teaching.

some important 'ritual'. The ash is actually alkaline and speeds the affect of the nicotine into the blood. The event with the tobacco does, however, stress obligation between mother and son.

The objectives that I hope students will understand on completion of this package are:

1. Described the stimulus material.
2. Identified the main issues raised by the stimulus material, focussing on issues of kinship, relatedness, as an important way of knowing Country.
3. Explored the ways in which the stimulus material represents Indigenous approaches to knowledge management.
4. Positioned the stimulus material within discussions of engagement with place.

5. Adapted to a situation where they have primary responsibility for their own learning and the teaching staff act as facilitators rather than authorities.
6. Demonstrated their acceptance of the responsibilities of collaborative learning.

In each class I ask students to solve a problem, answer a question, and propose a response to their given scenario in their small group. I explain to the students that there is no right or wrong answer, that rather their responses will indicate their own particular apperception, their life experience, or at times, ignorance. Rather than being a negative learning experience, there can be great pathos and humour. These learning experiences at times create much animated and loud conversation, or conversely, subdued intense conversations and sometimes silence. Each set of trigger materials brings with it its own emotional landscape, and over the years, I have learnt to predict some patterns in student responses to each PBL trigger that allows us to develop strategic responses drawing on our own experiences.

The trigger materials I give students hold many of the clues required to solve the problem, but are generally deeply culturally encoded, and initially most of the students are ill equipped to interpret the materials in any way at all. A period of time follows during which individuals attempt to problem solve using knowledge already gained from life, other anthropological or scientific studies, previous lectures, and literature read. Students sometimes have an intuitive understanding of the material but lack the language of explanation. I mentor their engagement with the trigger materials by separately moving between the groups responding to inquiries, assisting with interpretation but without revealing an 'ultimate solution' to the overall problem or scenario. Through this process, I slowly provide more of the knowledge necessary to decode the merit of the trigger material students hold. It is important then that I invest the classroom with a sense of safety, exploration, and fun so students are able to challenge their peers and also me, as they are first drawn into a personal reflection which is then negotiated with their group. Students themselves determine what I reveal to them by directing the question and answer process. Over the course of approximately an hour and a half, students become better equipped to respond to the problem posed and their responses evolve accordingly. Each group then presents their solutions to the rest of the class. Some students achieve epiphanies while others remain bewildered and confused. Ideally, those who attain understanding more quickly than others do share their interpretation with fellow students, thus creating a peer-based learning environment.

I note that some students adopt a mentoring role themselves among their peers as they reveal their own learning process, the way they have arrived at conclusions they draw, and understandings they achieve. This process often continues beyond the classroom where students have

been overheard in coffee shops and in other classes still exploring their understandings of the experiences they have shared in 'Hearing the Country', and we have received requests for additional avenues for ongoing communication and discussion. The process of informal peer-based mentoring is familiar to Indigenous students from their own cultural settings and so they willingly participate in sharing their perspectives with fellow students because of the weekly classes. Some of these Indigenous students are international students (Sami from Scandinavia, Maori from New Zealand, First Nations from North America) and their presence in the class provides windows through which other students are able to explore continuity and discontinuity between the localised experience of *Yanyuwa* traditions and Law and other Indigenous traditions.

Student Diversity and Reaching Through 'Expert' Performances into the Self

The challenge in the PBL triggers is that they demand a process of two-way engagement and what in the class have come to be called 'epistemological bridges'. The capacity of these 'epistemological bridges' to act as powerful decolonialising tools within the individual becomes more apparent when we reflect upon the backgrounds of students who enrol in the course. From the outset, the class brings together many streams of Western thinking about the key issues. While the course is clearly offered as an anthropology class from a classical anthropological tradition, large numbers of students enrol from archaeology, botany, ecology, education, English, environmental management, geography, journalism, law, peace and conflict studies, philosophy, political science, psychology, and zoology. Each of these students has already begun their training in the power of their epistemological positioning and in the myth of the expert performance in each of these arenas, and yet it is often this class that exposes that power of those traditions, as the following quote from a biology student highlights:

Why did I not think about this? Why did I think there was only one way to classify the world, a western way? When I looked at the Indigenous examples I first thought 'simple', 'wrong' but then I had to admit, I did not even understand half of the details embedded in the way things were being classified. The dugong example just shocked me, the West has one name and then the Yanyuwa have 26, and the detail! I just had to stop and say nothing. (Student journal, 2010)

Non-Indigenous students initially experience the course structure and process as sites of difference and disorientation; however, Indigenous students experience the course as a site of affirmation. For Indigenous students, the course provides the opportunity to position and critique the university as a cultural institution and through that positioning, they are able to decode what is often the mystery

of the Western academy in relation to their own cultural understandings of constructions of knowledge and power.

I encourage the students to understand themselves at the place and space in which transformation occurs. By transformation I mean a process by which an individual explores cultural knowledge and synthesises this knowledge with their own individual points of reference, which are sometimes contested against their life experience and learning up until that point. This is an experience with the self: a point that is so often subsumed beneath the expert performance students learn during the undergraduate experience. Through the PBL triggers, I seek to move students away from a philosophical quest for singular timeless and universal truths. Students then confront and grow more comfortable with the experience of the temporally and spatially situated nature of any given truths, and the importance of empathic engagement in order to begin any conversation that exists in a culturally liminal space. The academic construction that students may obtain a universal truth is challenged as they learn that experience is finite and that their perspective is but one angle by which we discover there are other points of view, different from, and not reducible, to our own.

During the weekly classes, the lecture room becomes a site of intense conversations, laughter, argument and sometimes tears. The room becomes a location where students can realise the inclination to open themselves to the influences of a different learning environment and the individuals they meet there. By developing and preserving this exploratory disposition, I can nurture the capacity to engage in creative transferences between one another by virtue of the sometimes highly symbolic but simultaneously fundamentally practical material that we explore. Transference of individually held knowledge occurs not just through engagement with the PBL triggers but also in the subsequent group discussions, discursive reflections, and individual analysis. The pedagogy we use removes the performative and more traditional aspects of the role of teacher. I propose that everyone in the class including ourselves are learners and have the potentiality to experience transference and transformation because of that process (see hooks, 1994; Biren, Gurin, & Lopez, 2003). This reality is most often either ignored or denied for the sake of pretence and power. I propose that neutrality is pretence. As a teacher I become a symbolic object of transference that is experienced through engagement with the PBL triggers in what becomes an essentially liminal space. Rather than keeping our personal lives carefully submerged beneath an objective persona, we confide in one another meaningful fragments of our pasts just as we expect our students to do. These are pedagogical performances without masks.

Reflexivity

The students undertake a variety of assessable activities, including traditional essays situated firmly within a

realm of contest between Indigenous and Western knowledge systems. The essay topics act to direct and focus the understandings, discourses and personal experiences the students have developed throughout the semester. I have struggled over the appropriate assessment modes for 'Hearing the Country' given the power of the class experience and the way that assessment invokes and reinforces the very institutional constructs of which we want students to gain a critical understanding.

In response to my own unease regarding traditional assessment, we have chosen to give much attention and weight to each student's reflexive journal as I had already found reflexive writings a rich and inclusive mode of engaging with students in their deep learning. Each student participates in a private dialogue (Boud et al., 1985; Lee & Barnett, 1994) with me through weekly reflexive responses to the trigger material and set literature. Therefore, I give weight to the value of students' reflexive practice by adding it to performance evaluation. I adopt a model of awarding marks not for reflection content or structure, but for the actual submission of a reflexive journal at the end of the semester (see e.g., Bawden, 1991; Boud et al.; Butler, 1996; Hogan, 1995; Mezirow, 1990; Morrison, 1996; November, 1996; O'Connor, 1997; Ross, 1989, Schön, 1983, 1992; Stockhausen & Creedy, 1994; Sykes, 1986; Walden, 1988). I present the students with a guide to reflexive writing and then we respond to questions students may have in regard to their reflections individually, sometimes on a weekly basis over the course of the semester.

Again, as with the PBL triggers, there is no 'right' answer in the reflexive text. I explain to students that we do not just want them to defend their intellectual interpretations of material, but that we encourage them in acknowledging their emotional responses as well. We stress to them that our emotions are real and we need to learn to deal with them in all of our work situations, they are after all a part of the real world. The conversation that develops tends then to reflect the anxieties and tensions sometimes felt by the students during the semester as the following example demonstrates.

I can no longer contemplate the application of Western and Indigenous knowledge processes as proposed in this course. What is wrong with Western knowledge anyway? It has worked for years and continues to do so. (Three weeks later the student made her own added commentary to this statement) I guess I am frightened of the complexity of all of this, I am still not sure how it all works. (Student journal, 2010)

I ask students to write 500 to 1000 words per reflexive exercise. However, it is more common to find students write several thousand words in response to reflections, thus demonstrating a meaningful commitment to their own self, their own journey and their own desires to engage with the world, no longer accepting that the university, for example, is the be all of education in regards to learning and educative development, as well of

understandings of self and Other, and the nature of knowledge and knowing. Instead, they explore the situated legitimacy of knowledge. I have had journals submitted that are over 150 pages in length that explore very deeply both issues of the individual as an embodied learner and what this might mean personally for them. Impassioned statements and declarations such as the above are important elements of reflexive writing as they frequently flag momentous points of provocation on the journey of self-discovery. The majority of students experience such moments as they experience shifts in their understandings of the Other as much as of themselves and the world they experience. The following comment though is rare, but is also reflective of the kind of cognitive dissonance many students experience when presented with the position that both western and Indigenous knowledge systems are equally legitimate.

This class reeks of a complete lack of intellectual integrity. (Student journal, 2009)

Many students experience dilemmas when faced with a way of thinking that does not reify either Western or Indigenous knowledge. However, I propose that as educators, rather than mask the dilemmas individuals generally encounter when they first work with the Other, we encourage students to experience some element of those feelings before leaving the learning environment. In order to deconstruct the Other we have to deconstruct ourselves, and develop an interior dialogue which forces the questions: 'What or who is the Other?'

We cannot bring the totality of Indigenous lives, knowledge and Law into the classroom, but through the relationship established with the *Yanyuwa* families, I have been able to introduce real-life scenarios that trigger the same disorientation, fear and insecurities as well as humour and joy that most students do not experience unless they work within cross-cultural situations. At that point, traditionally, the individual 'manages' their responses according to their own reflexive capabilities, which have often not been developed adequately, if at all. Unfortunately, they may therefore invoke the position of expert acquired through their university degree rather than explore their lack of expertise in a given scenario because of the traditional notion of education. In their resulting practice, they can continue to fulfil the colonial pedagogies that impose themselves on the Other rather than the self, a form of practice I seek to challenge. However many students appear not to do this and I have postcards, letters, and emails from ex-students that speak to the value of the learning they have undertaken in 'Hearing the Country'.

An ex-student of 'Hearing the Country' emailed me in 2012 and told me he had been reading his journal and then made the following comments in regards to how the course has assisted him in his work:

After taking your 'Hearing the Country' class a few years ago (which I choose as an elective unrelated to the rest of my

Arts/Science degree) my partner and I moved to the East Kimberley for three years. We had an amazing time, but I have to say that having taken that class made it a completely different experience for me.

A few of many examples that come to mind are:

- *Having white friends who work for NGOs say 'it's not logical' all the time when talking about the behaviour in the community and their footy team mates. I did try to explain the difference between Cartesian and non-Cartesian systems of knowledge but didn't get that far.*
- *Knowing not go where you shouldn't go. The reality is white people go wherever they want, 'exploring'. Thanks to your course I knew better, that if you know you shouldn't go somewhere you don't.*
- *Every time I saw a sea eagle I would think of the tutorial.*
- *I think I was part of a small minority who actually questioned why the local government logo is 'The Last Frontier'. Even more disturbing (or amusing — I'm not sure which) the local Warringari radio station plays a jingle around being the last frontier between every song.*
- *Something else that I would like to thank you for is the way that you taught the 'Hearing the Country' class. In my studies at the moment I am researching students' 'learning approaches' and its relationship to context in which course is delivered. These learning approaches are separated between 'deep' and 'surface'. In my numerous years of undergraduate higher education your subject is the only one that I can think off that in its teaching actually used the 'deep' approach in its teaching and encouraged it from students. It is the only subject I can think of that actually seriously got students to question its foundations, its way of looking, its meaning and its constructions of meanings. (Ex-student email, 2012)*

It is inevitable that the institution constructs the student as expert and that the student will perform this role in their working life. 'Hearing the Country' constantly challenges this position by providing a learning environment that allows students to understand that a position of ignorance is not threatening and does not necessarily imply a lack of intelligence or respect. As an instructor, I am constantly learning from the students, as many of their questions are profound. They can generate animated conversation and reflection on my part. The learning environment becomes dynamic and responsive for everyone involved. I do not simply follow the 'chalk and talk' formula to 'complete' the course and to groom future experts. An individual is able to shift from a position of ignorance to a position of awareness, given time, opportunity and a respectful environment in which to do so. The following comment demonstrates one student's understanding of the value and impact of learning in a respectful environment, where respect does not mean sterility or inertia.

Through out this entire course the lecturer has helped me traverse some of the most confronting material vis-à-vis cross-cultural communication, which has inspired me to pursue this field of research and praxis further into postgraduate study. The lecturer has always shown the utmost respect towards my ideas, and me, and teaches with passion and intellectual flair unparalleled. (Monash University Teaching evaluation, 2010)

Conclusions

Personally, I cannot attain certain learning expectations without a mentoring process that provides the safety that facilitates honesty and opportunity. The act of mediation also acts to diffuse the intensity of emotional, physical and intellectual response to circumstances outside of the norm. This process requires a certain confidence on the part of the educator. I need to trust in the students. I cannot fear them and their responses. Thus I can no longer see them as passive consumers, but active, intense agents responding eagerly, even tempestuously as we discuss how the knowledge we are experiencing connects with our actual lives.

An important element of this course is my approach to the academic performance. Rather than seeing myself as responsible for relaying information and transferring data to students, I choose to mentor students as they explore their responses, emotional and intellectual, to carefully selected exemplar triggers. In so doing, I can free myself from traditional roles, as do the students. We collaborate in creating a liminal space in which the diversity in perspective and knowledge among students becomes the strength of the learning experience, rather than the barrier. Students then model for themselves the means by which they may engage in cross-cultural discourse when relating to and working with Indigenous peoples in the future.

I argue that we can only source true reflection in actual experience. We can think about information all we like, but it ultimately remains abstract and dislocated from our being until we have the essential and embodied experience of other knowledge systems from which we are then able to reflect. Students inevitably experience themselves consciously because of reflexivity. The role of the objective observer is challenged. They discover themselves as emotional as well as intellectual beings, who cannot position themselves as separate from the world in which they exist. In gaining insights about themselves, they are transformed sometimes, uncomfortably. Transformation in this context assists in equipping students for later professional experience. I therefore hope to equip them with a means by which to acknowledge and reflect on events they may experience in the future, thus providing them with the opportunity to explore their own practice as a part of those experiences.

The course remains one that generates intense response. Some students continue the discursive reflection for years afterwards. In 2004, I received a series of intimate

and honest reflections squeezed onto large postcards from an ex-student travelling from northern China to El Salvador to work with Indigenous peoples. I felt compelled to respond even though we lacked any forum to do so, and I found myself laughing and glowing after the arrival of each postcard. The honesty is crucial. If students are able to break through their fantasies, their expectations, their assumptions about the world, they are then able to see, hear, feel and think differently.

Acknowledgments

The writing of this article has only been possible due to my teaching experiences over the last 10 years in ANTH2060: 'Reading the Country' as it was called at The University of Queensland and as ATS2359/3359 'Hearing the Country' at Monash University. This course could not have been taught without the use of the intellectual property of the *Yanyuwa* families. The *Yanyuwa* family members who have mentored me over the past 3 decades have also been instrumental in making sure that the subject matter being taught in 'Hearing the Country' is always relevant in regards to issues that they believe it is important to share with a larger audience of predominately non-Indigenous Australians. I also acknowledge the passion and commitment of all the students who have participated in this course both at The University of Queensland and Monash University, and I am indebted to some of them for allowing me to use their words in this article.

References

- Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination* (Trans. C. Emerson & M. Holquist). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bawden, R. (1991). Reflection on the action of reflections in action: Of cars, helicopters and satellites. In C. Zuber-Skerritt (Ed.), *Action learning for improved performance: Key contributions to the first world congress of action research and process management* (pp. 86–90). Brisbane, Australia: AEBIS Publishing.
- Berkes, F. (1999). *Sacred ecology: Traditional ecological knowledge and resource management*. Philadelphia, PA: Taylor and Francis.
- Biren, N., Gurin, P., & Lopez, G. (2003). Transformative pedagogy for democracy and social justice. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 6(2), 165–191.
- Boud D., Keogh R., & Walker D. (Eds.) (1985). *Reflection: Turning experience into learning*. London: Kogan Page.
- Bradley, J., Devlin-Glass, F., & Mackinlay, E. (1999). Towards a new kind of two-way classroom. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 27(2), 24–26.
- Bradley, J., & Devlin-Glass, F. (2010). *Affect and narrative encoding: The problematics of representing and teaching Yanyuwa narratives in cyberspace*. Athens, Greece: School of Humanities, The Hellenic Open University.

- Butler, J. (1996). Professional development: Practice as text, reflection as process and self as locus. *Australian Journal of Education*, 40(3), 265–283.
- Graham, T. (Director). (1994). *Ka-Wayawayama — Aeroplane Dance* [Motion picture]. Sydney, Australia: Film Australia.
- Hogan, C. (1995). Creative and reflective journal processes. *The Learning Organisation*, 2, 4–17.
- Hook, B. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Kearney, A. (2011). ‘These are the choices we make’: Animating saltwater Country. *Screening the Past*. Retrieved from <http://www.screeningthepast.com/2011/08/these-are-the-choices-we-make-animating-saltwater-country/>
- Lee, G.V., & Barnett, B.G. (1994). Using reflective questioning to promote collaborative dialogue. *Journal of Staff Development*, 15, 16–22.
- Levinas, E. (1992). Transcending words: Concerning word-erasing. *Yale French Studies*, 8, 148–156.
- Mezirow J. (Ed.). (1990). *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Morrison, K. (1996). Developing reflective practice in higher degree students through a learning journal. *Studies in Higher Education*, 21(3), 17–332.
- November, P. (1996). Journals for the journey into deep learning: A framework. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 15(1), 115–127.
- O’Connor, S. (1997). *Reflexive journals as a source of data revealing aspects of the design process in mechanical engineering*. Proceedings from the annual postgraduate research conference. Brisbane, Australia: Department of Anthropology and Sociology, The University of Queensland.
- Ross, D.D. (1989). First steps in developing a reflective approach. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 40, 22–30.
- Schmidt, H.G. (1983). Problem-based learning: Rationale and description. *Medical Education*, 17, 11–16.
- Schön, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.
- Schön, D. A. (1992). Designing as reflective conversation with the materials of a design situation. *Research in Engineering Design*, 3, 131–147.
- Sonnenberg, D. (Producer). (1989). *Buwarrala Akarriya (Journey East)* [Video recording]. Borroloola: Marndaa Productions (Yanyuwa Community).
- Stockhausen, L., & Creedy, D. (1994). Journal writing: Untapped potential for reflection and consolidation. In S. Chen, R. Cowdroy, A. Kingsland, & M. Ostwald (Eds.), *Reflections on problem based learning* (pp. 73–85). Newcastle, Australia: Australian Problem Based Learning Network.
- Strachan, C., & Cavadini, A., with the Borroloola Aboriginal community (Directors and Producers). (1981). *Two laws* [Video recording]. Sydney, Australia: Australian Film Institute assisted by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs.
- Sykes, G. (1986). Teaching as reflective practice In A.K. Sirotnik, & J. Oakes (Eds.). *Critical perspectives on the organisation and improvement of schooling* (pp. 229–245). Boston, MA: Kluwer Nijhoff.
- Turner, V. (1982). Performing ethnography. *The Drama Review*, 26, 33–35.
- Walden, P.A. (1988). A learning journal as a tool to promote lifelong learning skills. *Feminist Teacher*, 3(2), 14–17.

About the Author

Associate Professor John Bradley is the Deputy Director of the Monash Indigenous Centre at Monash University. He lectures in Indigenous studies, with a particular emphasis on decolonising methodologies. He has worked with the Yanyuwa people of the south-western Gulf of Carpentaria in the Northern Territory for over three decades. His work and commitment in this area of Australia is ongoing and involves joint work with *Yanyuwa* Elders and youth on issues associated with land and sea management, developing animation as an effective method of recording intangible heritage and as a learning device within schools in regards to the cross generational transfer of knowledge. He speaks two Indigenous languages and is presently rewriting and reviewing the *Yanyuwa* encyclopaedic dictionary, a work which has spanned 30 years.