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Australian Indigenous Tertiary Studies: A Discussion with Professor David Boud on Experience-Based Learning and the Transformation of University Courses

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This article critically examines the possibility of using Problem-Based Learning as an approach to teaching and learning and curriculum design in Indigenous studies. This approach emphasises the potential for Experience-Based Learning or Problem-Based Learning as a model that frames the curriculum and pedagogical activities to encourage student engagement with key issues in ways they find meaningful. It takes the form of an interview with Professor David Boud, a well-known scholar in this area.

■ **Keywords:** transformative learning, Indigenous studies, Experience-Based Learning, Problem-Based Learning

This article explores the use of Experience-Based Learning (EBL; Andresen, Boud, & Cohen, 2000) approaches and the application of Problem-Based Learning (PBL; Boud & Feletti, 1997) as both a way of organising courses and their teaching and learning activities to facilitate meaningful student engagement in Australian Aboriginal history and politics issues at the tertiary level. The transformative learning possibilities of PBL and EBL are explored through a discussion between Professor of Adult Education, David Boud, and Senior Lecturer in Aboriginal history and politics, Heidi Norman. David Boud is Professor of Adult Education in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney and a Senior Fellow of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council. He has been involved in research and teaching development in adult, higher and professional education for nearly 40 years and has contributed extensively to the literature. His particular contributions have been in developing our understanding of how we learn from experience, and the role of reflection in learning. His work in higher education has focused on how courses and teaching practices can be more learning-centred and how assessment can contribute more effectively to learning. He has published 15 books (with various others) and has a longstanding interest in learning from experience, and has contributed extensively to the literature on reflection, informal learning, assessment for learning and learning in work contexts. The discussion seeks to consider new approaches to Aboriginal history and politics curricula at the tertiary level.

In some respects the teaching of 'Aboriginal studies' in Australian universities is not new. There are several examples of Aboriginal studies-related programs being offered at Australian universities from the 1970s and 1980s (Mooney & Cleverley, 2010). These courses were within a particular social, political and vocational setting, and mostly developed in the context of the emerging 'cultural nationalism' that characterised nation-wide Aboriginal activism in the post referendum era (Martinez, 1997; McGregor, 2009). Aboriginal education — both the training of adults and as they in turn would play a key role supporting and sustaining identity and improving the education outcomes for younger Aborigines — became a vital tool in the liberation and empowerment of Aboriginal people.

A further discernable shift in the public knowing of Aboriginal history was precipitated by the Commonwealth Government-initiated national movement for Aboriginal reconciliation that began taking form around the time of the bicentenary of the modern nation-state, in 1988. The

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bicentenary protest was a pivotal crossroad in the country's history. Badges, stickers and t-shirts bore the slogan 'White Australia has a black history, don't celebrate 1988', and the massive rally from Redfern, through the streets of Sydney to the Harbour foreshore, with satellite protests across the country, brought political discomfort and cultural consternation. Of the 'Eight key issues' identified for action over the decade-long national movement for Reconciliation from 1990, half referred to the need to address wider community awareness of Australian Indigenous history and culture (Sutherland, 1983). Then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and architect of the Reconciliation initiative, Robert Tickner, affirmed the centrality of education and awareness in explaining that one of three key goals of the Reconciliation movement was 'the education of non-Indigenous Australians about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture' (Tickner, 2001, p. 29).

The reconciliation movement created wider momentum for 'grass roots' engagement with local Aboriginal histories. Concomitant with intellectual shifts in historiography that placed Indigenous perspectives as central to understanding the past (Reynolds, 1981, 1984, 1990) interpretations of Australia's history was divided beyond disciplinary innovations to heated ideological debates over public policy approaches to Indigenous affairs (Attwood, 2005). These developments point to a complex moment in the teaching of Aboriginal history and perspectives in the higher education setting. While the reconciliation movement and the earlier, culturally infused modern pan-Aboriginal movement from the 1970s shifted the focus to the need for a wider awareness of Indigenous perspectives and history, strategies to achieve this awareness are part of an ongoing project. With funding from the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, the project that this edition of *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* is dedicated to reflects the desire to seriously consider approaches to teaching and learning that seek to engage with the history of exclusion of Indigenous perspectives — both in the scholarly environment and wider Australian society. This approach is not exclusively dedicated to the education of Australian tertiary students *about* Aboriginal people. Aboriginal scholars are also engaged in a process of understanding the forces of colonialism and modernity as economic and cultural systems that invariably shape our world. Further, it is also incumbent upon us as educators to address the very real disadvantage of Aboriginal lives and equip graduates with the skills to be agents of change. Neither is it a way to transmit knowledge about Aboriginal peoples and history. Rather, it is concerned with enabling tertiary students to gain a meaningful appreciation of Indigenous issues from the perspectives of those engaged in them.

This is a key focus of undergraduate programs at the University of Technology, Sydney where emphasis is placed on the application of theoretical knowledge with 'hands-on', 'practical' experience. This is reflected in the Communication program, where across the six majors (social inquiry, creative writing, media arts and production, journalism, advertising, public relations and information management), content and assessment activities emphasise problem solving; the development of research skills; convergences between fields of practice; and social advocacy, community service and contribution to public debates concerning relevant social and political issues. It is within this transdisciplinary theory and practice learning context that the Australian Aboriginal Studies sub-major sits.

To this end, pedagogy becomes an important consideration in the tertiary level Aboriginal history and politics subjects. Experience-Based Learning and Problem-Based Learning are explored in the following interview as strategies to create a useful space for transforming students' pre-existing knowledge and experience of the wider intellectual currents that have shaped the exclusion of Indigenous perspectives — inside the academy and in the wider national conscious — and to resource students with skills to contribute through their chosen professional fields to Indigenous perspectives.

I start here by asking Professor Boud to explain the key features of Problem-Based Learning:

Professor Boud: Problem-Based Learning is probably the biggest innovation that's occurred in education for the professions, ever. It comprises two main features. Firstly, it's a whole way of organising the curriculum. Most notably PBL has, for example, transformed the medical curriculum away from courses that started with the basic sciences where you didn't actually get to deal with a medical problem until you were in your third year, to a curriculum in which you start with real cases and then move on to more of them. In this, PBL is a way of organising the whole curricula or whole programs around a series of carefully chosen problems.

Secondly, PBL structures particular kinds of pedagogical activities within courses. So there's a kind of pedagogy that goes with PBL. This pedagogy confronts students with common real situations. It places them in the situation of asking themselves: 'What can I do in this situation?' It focuses on developing in students the capacity to ask questions, to plan and organise their own learning, and for them to take responsibility for what they're doing, for their own learning, rather than being driven by some kind of lecture program.

Norman: You mentioned medical training. Has PBL informed particular approaches to teaching and learning in medicine?

Professor Boud: PBL has transformed medical education. If we take the pedagogy end of it, a common situation might be in a medical degree. In the first class of the first week of first year, students meet in a tutorial situation and are confronted with a scenario, typically in the form of a real (simulated or imagined) person, who falls down and collapses to the floor in front of them, they're writhing,

have shortness of breath and are generally distressed. The tutor has said nothing at this stage, and the tutor asks the students, confronted with this vivid situation: 'What do you do?'

At this stage the students have done no medicine whatsoever; they've got none of the knowledge base. So they say, oh well, maybe we need to turn them on their side — perhaps based on earlier first aid training. Others might suggest checking whether the airways are blocked. A host of responses are canvassed and in the process students start to generate questions and, as the discussion proceeds, they raise more and more questions. All the while, the tutor is prompting them with additional information (the pulse is weak, etc.). So they're given some kind of information about the background, and then they ask more questions.

At the end of the initial session students will have drawn up a whole set of questions and things they need to find out about in order to deal with the situation they've been confronted with. They then go off and independently research them. Then, a day or two later they reconvene and share what they've done, talk about it and identify what further information they require (measurements, tests etc.). By the end of the first week — over several sessions — they review the situation and say well, what we know about this situation is.

By the end of the week, they know something about respiration; they know something about the circulation of blood. They've learned the necessary subject knowledge in the light of the problem rather than being given the knowledge and then later, often years later, applying it to some real situation. So that's the focus of Problem-Based Learning: it starts with a problem, it's an engaging problem and it's an interesting problem — it draws the students in — it focuses their attention wonderfully and it prompts them to be active and to pursue an agenda.

Norman: The 'problems' would have to be very well chosen and carefully scripted in order to ensure the full learning outcomes are achieved?

Professor Boud: In PBL these 'problems' are very, very carefully chosen so it's not any old 'collapse' that they get to work on. The problems are chosen carefully in order that they will necessarily understand particular kinds of medical knowledge. But their learning of this knowledge is achieved not through being told, but rather by being confronted by problems that give them the impetus to learn. They can be tested on that knowledge in the same ways anyone can be tested, but commonly, they're tested by being given a different problem and asked what they would do in that situation. The whole course proceeds by these sorts of problems. There might be one or two other things in the program as well, but that's the heart of it.

Norman: You said medical training was the first to embrace PBL, what sort of time period are we talking about?

Professor Boud: From the early 1960s. It might not have been described quite as clearly as that then, but that's where it started in the US. It was taken up in Canada at McMaster University — which became very famous for it — a guy called Howard Barrows was the great advocate of PBL and he spread the idea. Medical schools throughout the world adopt a PBL approach, including Harvard and many of the well-known medical schools in Australia. From medicine it was taken up in the health-related professions — mostly in areas that dealt with people rather than things. While it has been used in engineering and the sciences it hasn't really been embraced in those areas in quite the same way as in social work, for example.

Norman: I understand social work educators were uncomfortable with the construction of subjects, or clients as 'problems'?

Professor Boud: Oh yes, there's a big difference in terminology in social work. Social work does PBL but it doesn't like the word 'problem' because it's a part of their professional ethos that people should not be positioned as having problems as this tends to set up a situation that generates a blaming the victim kind of dynamic. So they use other terms, for example, 'enquiry and action learning'. The terms used don't really have quite the same precision as the word 'Problem-Based Learning'. But they're a way of avoiding the focus on people having 'problems'. In the social work education arena, while the language is different, a similar approach applies. Students are confronted with a situation, for example, that they're with a client that's in this particular situation. In the same way they set up a scenario, very much like the medical world, although in their own context.

Norman: Is the language important?

Professor Boud: I don't think the particular language is important, but the particular nature of the educational practice is. What I'm most interested in is the pedagogy of it and the way it shapes the curriculum. That's really important. So if you want to call it something else, I'm completely relaxed about that, because if it helps people to accept it then the word itself isn't the issue. But the idea that you capture students' imagination and you generate learning from an involving, engaging situation in which they see they need to do something, that's what we should to hang on to.

Norman: In the Indigenous studies classroom setting 'Experience-Based Learning' could offer a useful model. You identify some key characteristics and forms of EBL. These include: learner-centred, participatory; emphasis on direct engagement; involvement in learning of the whole person; recognition and active use of learners' life experience and learning; critical reflection/analysis of learning experience and use of experiential learning. You have written that 'experience' is the foundation of, and stimulus for, learning, that learners need to actively construct their own experience and develop the critical understanding of the particular socioeconomic context in which it occurs (Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993). Earlier, you also emphasised the importance of 'learner control',

involvement of self' and correspondence of learning and real environments (Boud, 1989). Can you add to this how EBL and PBL differ?

Professor Boud: Problem-Based Learning is a fairly well defined set of practices. So that you can go from one place to another and you can very easily see they're doing PBL: these are the problems, these are the kind of groups they have, these are the meetings and it's relatively well structured. Experience-Based Learning is more of a general orientation to teaching and learning. It doesn't demand a particular set of practices. What EBL really means is that the experience of the learner is taken as the starting point and the generator of learning. So that it's either the experience the student brings with them from their past experiences — they come with that into the classroom — or as a teacher you set up some kind of challenging event that creates a new experience for them that they respond to.

So, for example, with PBL, the new experience is the person collapsing on the floor in front of you. You could read PBL as a particular example of an Experience-Based approach. The emphasis in EBL is that you engage not just the minds of the learner, but their emotions, their commitment, their feelings. You work as a teacher with all of those things rather than just the ostensible intellectual content.

Some features of EBL are more salient in some situations than others. But from the learning point of view it's all about building from the learner's experience. So you're starting always with where the learner is at rather than with some deficiency in the learner. It's about facilitating a dialogue rather than a monologue. Not: 'I'm going to tell you things; you're presently inadequate and I'm going to make you adequate.' That's a philosophy I'm very opposed to. We need to respect learners and start with where they're at, with what they've experienced, and help move them forward by helping them reflect on their experiences, but also creating new events where they have new experiences and they learn from reflecting on those as well.

Norman: An example of a learning activity that incorporated EBL was a case study role-play based on a real life event — the construction of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge in South Australia (Norman, 2004). For this activity, students researched from the perspective of a particular player in the disputed development, participate in a role-play based on the events and then consider an alternate framework and outcome for resolving the dispute. This assessment was highly valued by students and the depth and quality of student learning was stunning. The significant learning experience related to how students experienced the dispute, how they came to appreciate the sense of exclusion, of being silenced, or adversely of having a strong voice and feeling the weight of rationality on your side as the logic of progress and modernity was more easily comprehended. They also experienced the wider issues of power, racism and the limits of rights protection. In this, students came to experience the multiple and complex dimensions of the dispute both from their stakeholder perspective and others. So it was the experience of the event, with the full sense of it being real, that drove the breadth of the learning outcomes.

Professor Boud: Role-play or simulation is a very good example of learning from experience in that the students inhabit the roles. So they're not talking *about* a problem, they're not reading *about* a problem, they are taking on the identity of players that are a part of the enactment of that situation, so that they're putting themselves into it. They get worked up, they get energised and their feelings are brought into the whole picture. The situation you describe is a classic example of an experience-based learning situation. If one were to look at that from the point of view of Problem-Based Learning, there would be other questions that you would want to ask. One question is what constitutes the solution of the problem? So, for example, if different people take up different roles and identities and then they write and speak from those roles and identities, you've fragmented the problem but you haven't brought those different perspectives together again to readdress the problem. So one of the key features of PBL is that you start from the questions, you identify what needs to be known, you go off in different directions, but then you bring it all back to reapply it to the original situation. What you're seeking there is an agreement of the players on what they would do to move forward. So there's a slight difference between what you describe and what would happen in PBL. It may be that different players, depending on what identity they took up, would take a very, very different view of the situation. They may well be reinforced in that view. So there's a question in my mind about where do you leave it? It shouldn't be left with prejudices reinforced, for example.

Norman: However, one of the issues perhaps with the learning activity related to the dispute and Aboriginal rights protection is that there isn't a 'problem' (beyond the overarching enormity of the 'problem' of power) as such that students are resolving.

Professor Boud: One of the things that the PBL practitioners have learned over the years is that you need to choose the problems unbelievably carefully because some problems in the real world are so complex that you can't realistically expect students to appreciate them and make some progress on them within the time scale of the course. So that although all the problems in medicine are real problems, they're not necessarily quite as full and complicated as the ones they will later encounter in the real clinical setting. So I think that's another consideration. If you're using a real, contemporary problem, it's often got so many dimensions that it can be very distracting and quite confusing at times.

Norman: But in a sense the revealing of that complexity, of the absence of clear conclusions and clear answers,

could be a really useful learning experience for students of Indigenous studies.

Professor Boud: I think that's right. Maybe that is important in your context. But there's a part of me that wants to say you've got to find the successes as well, that students need to experience the fact that there are some issues in the Indigenous affairs world that are resolvable. They're not all intractable. So while I agree that that kind of problem you're describing is probably necessary for people to understand that the situation, the state we're in, it's probably also important for them to see that there has been some way of moving forward in some other areas and that they actually have the capacity to do something worthwhile. We don't want students to have a greater understanding, but less capacity to do anything about it.

I'd be inclined to consider introducing other elements to your scenario. So that you wouldn't necessarily be dealing with the exact events of a particular real-life experience, but rather you would introduce a new development, perhaps one close to a real situation. Let's just imagine, for the sake of this scenario, that the Minister makes a significant announcement. Students can then respond to or pick up on that. The original scenario is embellished to create situations in which students have to identify and agree how to act. So then people have to kind of reassemble around that. So I think there's all sorts of variations on a theme. We're not looking here at a set of practices that are set in stone.

Norman: There are challenges in how we move forward in thinking about Indigenous studies in higher education. There's an intellectual dimension, a professional practice element and then there's the task of bringing students to a more considered critical perspective. The transformative learning dimension requires considerable preparation of learning experiences — to bring students to a more constructive space in how they think about, engage, before PBL is a useful teaching and learning practice.

Professor Boud: Yes, but many of those things needed to prepare for it would be EBL because one of the characteristics of this field is that, except for maybe a few students that have come recently from overseas, they've all got a point of view. The students have grown up in a culture in which Aboriginal issues are all around — they've imbibed various things about these issues from those around them, for good and bad. So they're always starting from somewhere. Whatever you do as a teacher, you can't deny that. You have got to have a pedagogy that allows this to be acknowledged and for students to move from there into a deeper appreciation.

For example, the engaging challenge that stimulates students to really get into it. You want to hang onto that feature and you probably want to hang onto the idea of having students doing all sorts of different things, coming back and reapplying their understanding to the original situation, to see how they can see it differently. One of the things that I think is probably quite important is this shift. You're trying to create a shift — not just a shift in knowledge but a shift of understanding, a shift of the conception of how people see certain important issues, and by reapplying their work back to the original situation, allows them to start to notice that they have made a shift.

If you're then going to link PBL with EBL then, well, you've got an example yourself in your role-play scenario. While role-plays are not a necessary feature of PBL they can easily be incorporated into it; they're just another way of getting deeper engagement in a particular situation. Reflection on learning is a critical dimension of PBL as much as EBL. In the medical model it's important that the students see that later they can actually deal with the problem much more effectively; that they've got the capacity to do something, whereas in the first week they are all at sea and didn't know what to do. All they could do was to ask good questions. Whereas by the end of the week they had some good answers which could be reapplied it to the original situation. There's a sense of awareness of one's own learning, which actually gives students a real boost of enthusiasm; they really think 'oh yes, something's really going on here'. It's a matter of having the stimulus of an activity that gives a good reason to reflect. If the perspective of students hasn't been shaken up in some way they just come back to the same place they started with. There needs to be something that's changed, some event that's thrown things up in the air to make the reflection really worthwhile. This doesn't mean to say reflection might not be worthwhile otherwise, but when you're looking at conceptual change then you need some tangible experience to provoke it.

Norman: This comes down to very careful choice of examples and careful structuring of the learning outcomes.

Professor Boud: Yes, and trying to think yourself into the very different positions that different students will start with and how they'd react to it. So it's a kind of imaginative projection into 'what's likely to occur if I did this?' You almost have to think it through from the point of view if I did this, if I did that, what are the possibilities?

One of the things you have to do as a teacher in this way of operating is you have to put your foot in the water, so that there's a lot of what we are discussing that you can only do through careful trial and error. You have to try something out; you think, well, I think this would work, and then you trial it and then you modify it. So when you're dealing with challenging situations, we can't, as teachers of any kind, be expected to get it completely right the first time around. Someone who's an expert teacher doesn't get it right the first time; what the really expert teacher does, is that they see that it's not going quite right, and then they can accommodate that very quickly. That is what makes them an expert teacher, not that they always know the right way to do things. So it's a matter of trying things out and having the repertoire to make adjustments

as necessary, and also to run through lots of iterations so that we try it with one group, we modify it a bit, we try it with another group, we modify it and so on.

Conclusion

Approaches to teaching and learning and broader pedagogical considerations have been widely explored in a range of professional and disciplinary areas. The purpose of the discussion with Professor Boud was to consider how these approaches might be considered in what is a different field. Indigenous studies is a field characterised by exclusion and which occupies a politically charged intellectual and professional space. The approaches explored in this article emphasise student-focused learning. This means starting from the perspective of the student and constructing situations in which they need to engage personally with a variety of others' perspectives and then reflect on the outcomes. For students to appreciate different views and ways of seeing things differently they need to be placed in new situations and find ways of coping with them. Experience-Based and Problem-Based Learning provide some useful ways of organising this and provide ways of extending the repertoire of approaches that can be used in Aboriginal education.

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