

Reflective Teaching Practice in a Darug Classroom: How Teachers can Build Relationships With an Aboriginal Community Outside the School

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This project has been developed on Darug country, Sydney to examine how pre-service and beginning teachers can work with Aboriginal people in their local urban community. These teachers often want to know how to approach an Aboriginal 'community', how they can ask Aboriginal people for information in order to include it in their teaching, and how to adopt respectful ways of talking when they contact a community member. While these questions are commonly addressed in the *Working with Community* documents published by the various state Departments of Education, we found that the actual practice of working with a community is daunting for many. This article therefore attempts to document two examples of this practice, and in so doing it applies the protocols identified by Martin (2008) to the reflective work of both a pre-service teacher and a university educator. It also draws on the extensive literature of reflective practice developed for classrooms, and applies this to pedagogical practice outside schools.

■ **Keywords:** community, Darug, Elders, pre-service teachers, reflective practice, respect

Graduate teachers are now expected to work closely with parents and other people in their school community to enhance student learning in the classroom (New South Wales Institute of Teachers, 2005). The importance of this collaboration in an Aboriginal context is underpinned by research from Harrison and Greenfield (2011) and the New South Wales Department of Education and Training and New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated (2004), which indicates that working closely with Aboriginal people is the most effective method of assisting student-teachers to understand and empathise with an Aboriginal perspective. However, for this relationship to work, schools need to work collaboratively with the Aboriginal community, where teachers commit themselves to valuing and reflecting upon Aboriginal knowledge (Muir, Rose, & Sullivan, 2010), and using this awareness to situate Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum.

While teachers have been assisted in this process by the various policies that are available on working with Aboriginal communities (e.g., Board of Studies NSW, 2008; New South Wales Department of Community Services,

2008), we were reminded recently of how complex and time consuming this process can be, especially when one attempts to develop community contacts for the first time. We recognised that the actual process of developing connections with Aboriginal people in the community for the purpose of improving one's classroom pedagogy is unclear and can be viewed as intimidating for many teachers. This is particularly the case for those who are just beginning their career, or are in the final stages of an education degree. For pre-service and beginning teachers, this apprehension may stem from being aware of the pressure to fulfil the many requirements of the graduate teaching standards, one of which indicates that graduate teachers should be able to 'demonstrate the capacity to work effectively with . . . community based personnel to enhance student learning opportunities' (New South Wales Institute of Teachers, 2005, p. 14).

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McAllister and Irvine (2000, p. 5) suggest that the university curriculum may present topics to encourage education students to analyse the potential impact of their 'cultural views, norms, values and biases' in the classroom, but offer them too early in the degree. This is because early study of these theories, in collaboration with experiential learning, can make it difficult to gain an understanding and enhance development, especially when reflective practice is considered a skill that is 'vaguely defined' (Rogers, 2002, p. 843). Potentially, these student teachers may assume that intercultural experiences should be based on a constructivist view (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003) whereby this relationship is best investigated when they are placed within a school environment that directly requires them to work with the school's Aboriginal community. Yet, it is this experience that will continue to stand alone if one does not associate the significance it deserves by making meaning from it through reflection (Rogers, 2002). We will highlight the need for beginning teachers to consider the protocols that are already established within a community (and school), and to place themselves in the picture by creating personalised experiences, while simultaneously looking 'within' so as to shape for themselves the foundations of reflective practice.

This article is directed at those pre-service and beginning teachers who have questions about the process of working with Aboriginal people in their local urban community. These teachers may want to know, for example, what they should be aware of before approaching a 'community'. Some may want to know how they can ask Aboriginal people for information, in order to include it in their teaching, and are therefore keen to understand respectful ways of talking when they contact an Aboriginal community member. Yet others want to know the importance of having a connection with the local community before they ask Aboriginal people to become a part of the school and share their knowledge with them, and their students. There may be pre-service teachers who are unsure what constitutes an Aboriginal community, and about the politics they may encounter in talking with Aboriginal people.

The concept of developing a learning community that enables participants to take ownership of the acquired knowledge and reflect on this within a professional and classroom environment, is recognised as one way to strengthen reciprocal relationships (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). However, before these relationships begin to form, there are some key methods or 'protocols' that have been identified for working with an Aboriginal community. It is these protocols that are acknowledged with pre-service and beginning teachers in mind as they relate to and include approaching relationships with Aboriginal people with honest intent and the desire to negotiate and get along with people. The suggestions also highlight varying levels of respect, which include respect for self; in particular, knowing what you want as an individual and a teacher

and making that explicit, as well as respecting others, especially the Aboriginal Elders in the community.

Through reviewing the literature that recommends how outsiders may enter into a reciprocal relationship with an Aboriginal community, we will also focus on how a teacher learns through his or her work in an Aboriginal community. It will interweave data from two case studies to gain insight into how careful reflective practice can be employed by pre-service teachers to build a 'community classroom'. We also aim to examine how reflective practice in Aboriginal community contexts can be taught to beginning teachers.

Background

Much of the literature around reflective practice focuses on teachers having the skills to reflect critically on what they do in the classroom. It draws on the interpretations of Dewey (1933), Dinkelman (2000), Mezirow (1981, 1990), Cruickshank (1985) and Schon (1987) to define and interpret various approaches to reflective practice. There is also extensive literature around the development of reflective practices of pre-service teachers; for example, Bagnall, 2005; Cavanagh and Prescott, 2010; Dinkelman, 2000; Le Cornu and Ewing, 2008; and Mills and Ballantyne, 2010. However, most of this literature focuses on teacher practice in 'built' classrooms, rather than on teacher practice in the community. The literature that documents how teachers can reflect on their practice of building relationships with Aboriginal communities is limited to a small number of studies from Smith (1999, 2005) in New Zealand, and Martin (2008) in Australia. Beginning teachers are expected by their state accrediting bodies to develop relationships with their community, but they rarely learn how to *do* this in practice.

Even the most confident pre-service and early career teachers may be worried about saying the 'wrong thing' when they approach an Aboriginal community for the first time. Without established contacts, reaching out to Aboriginal people can be a particularly daunting prospect for some teachers. We draw on the experiences and critical reflections of a pre-service teacher and lecturer in teacher education to identify some of the protocols around making contact with a local Aboriginal community. The study is set in Darug country (the Sydney basin) and details how Belinda, a pre-service teacher, made contact with the Darug with the intent to include Aboriginal perspectives in her classroom. It will outline what she experienced personally and professionally, and explore how these reflections are working to shape her identity as a beginning teacher with a consciousness of building an urban community classroom. Belinda maintained a blog while she was making contact with Darug community members, and data from this are presented as indented quotations throughout the article. Excerpts from an interview with Neil are also presented as an examination of his approach

over 30 years to make contact with the Aboriginal communities in which he has lived and worked across Australia. Neil's experiences as a teacher were originally developed in a different Aboriginal country to that of the Darug, although he has recently formed a relationship with this community with the aim of including Darug perspectives in teacher-education courses at university.

Who are Darug?

Darug country includes the Sydney basin and extends from the Sydney CBD to the Blue Mountains. Brooke and Kohen (1991, p. 6) estimate that there were around five to eight thousand Aboriginal people living in the Sydney region between Botany Bay, the Hawkesbury River and the Blue Mountains when it was invaded in 1788. One of the Darug clans, the Cadigal, lived on Warrang, or what is now known as Sydney Cove, where the First Fleet landed in 1788. The Cadigal were the first to come in contact with Captain Arthur Phillip and his men. As settlement spread out along the Hawkesbury and Nepean Rivers in 1794, food became scarce and local clans retaliated by burning or taking crops, killing farm animals and attacking the settlers who were on their land. Hollinsworth (2006, p. 69) notes that successive governors responded to Aboriginal resistance in violent ways and dispatched punitive expeditions to 'teach them a lesson'. But the lessons they learnt 'were principally to fear and distrust Europeans, to avoid them as much as possible, and to regard European culture as violent, brutal and uncivilised' (Hollinsworth, 2006, p. 69).

Over 200 years later, however, the Darug have opened a cultural centre in Sydney, and there are almost 20,000 Darug descendants living in Australia today (Kohen, 2009, p. 2). Various Darug organisations have been established to bring Darug together and to celebrate Darug culture in the community and in schools. Several major projects are currently under way in collaboration with the universities and the Darug community (e.g., University of Sydney, 2010) to ensure that university teachers and their students are provided with opportunities to increase awareness and understanding of Darug knowledge of place and history with the hope that these pre-service teachers will integrate their learning with future teaching practice.

Engaging in Reflective Practice: Knowing One's Self

If someone asked me, 'What is one message you would give a young person aspiring to be a good leader?' I would say you have got to be in touch with your attitude and learn about yourself first. It is important to be in tune with your own attitude and emotional intelligence. Be aware of your behaviour, actions and emotions and the impact they have ... You have to be constantly reflecting on your behaviour and sphere of influence and changing it to improve relationships with people. Recognise you can't change the behaviour of others but you can change your own. (Gill, 2008, pp. 104–105)

Martin (2008) also highlights the importance of having 'self-respect' when outsiders enter an Aboriginal community. Her research suggests that it is important for teachers to realise that in order to talk appropriately and respectfully to Aboriginal people, it is just as important to know about oneself. Moreton-Robinson (as cited in Martin, 2008, p. 19) recommends that this can begin with 'introducing one's self to other Indigenous people in order to provide information about one's cultural location, so that a connection can be made on political, cultural and social grounds and relations established'. Although Belinda attempts to follow the advice by talking about her personal background to help make that connection, she is absorbed by getting it right:

I was not sure where to begin, as I felt like it would be invasive to enter a community that I have no connection to. Nor could I ask for advice or a pathway to entry, because I did not know any Aboriginal people. I was quite apprehensive about contacting strangers to first be granted their permission to interview them to support my own learning. It just felt a little selfish, and one sided. So I took the easy pathway first and decided to start with getting acquainted with the written resources in print and web-based form to understand who the Darug are and where their land is. The more I read, the more I became aware that much of the content I was focusing on was written by white people, and that it defeated the purpose of understanding the Aboriginal community. If I continue to maintain my anxiety of being afraid to step outside my comfort zone, I think that I will present a similar identity to the community and to my future students. That's not the teacher I want to be. But how can I take that step in the right direction and make that connection independently of others, while consciously knowing that I appear respectful and genuine in my intentions to learn? (Excerpt from Belinda's blog)

Rogers (2002, p. 848) observes that reflection is a process of making sense of one's experiences, adding that 'the creation of meaning out of experience is at the very heart of what it means to be human'. She argues (2002, p. 860) that 'the growth of a teacher may well pass from self-absorption, to forgetting oneself, to self-awareness (observing and reflecting upon his or her actions, thoughts and emotions) as the reflective practice evolves'. Here, self-awareness is presented as the teacher being focused on the students and what is happening in the classroom rather than being self-absorbed with content. A key step in achieving self-awareness is, according to Rogers (2002, p. 855), 'experimentation'. The reflective teacher must put his or her theories to the test if he or she is to become 'present' in the classroom. As a beginning teacher in the Northern Territory, Neil looks back on the ways he became preoccupied with a need to fill the gaps in his knowledge:

Over the years I subsequently got to know more people as I went to the football, music performances, funerals, and so on. My approach was to take my time in meeting Aboriginal people

rather than trying to make things happen. I was young and had plenty of time. But I was very shy. When I first arrived in an Aboriginal community, I was preoccupied with what I didn't know about Aboriginal people, rather than observing and learning from the people with whom I was having contact. I was self-conscious at the time and this inhibited my ability to listen and learn from others. (Neil)

Rogers (2002, pp. 860-861) analyses the original work of John Dewey (1933) to conclude that 'the ability to observe is directly proportional to the degree to which one can be free from preoccupation. One common preoccupation for beginning teachers is the subject matter itself or, to be more precise, lack of subject matter knowledge'. She (Rogers, 2002, p. 863) highlights the importance of interactions between self, others and one's environment to support John Dewey's conclusion that 'in community with others the learner will broaden his or her understanding of an experience beyond where it might go in isolation'.

The findings presented by Rogers (2002) are supported in a recent study of three beginning teachers in Australia. Cavanagh and Prescott (2010, p. 148) conclude that beginning teachers are likely to focus more on themselves and not making a mistake, rather than listening to and becoming aware of the people with whom they want to interact. As teachers become more experienced they often learn to focus on the students in front of them as they begin to ask questions such as what learning occurred today rather than 'what did I teach today?' (Rogers, 2002, p. 860).

Working with an Aboriginal Community

The National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines for ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research (NHMRC, 2003) identify the form of the interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal as crucial in the production of mutual outcomes. These interactions are about recognising an ethical relationship, and are presented as guidelines that identify a set of values that are crucial in forming a relationship with the Aboriginal community. The NHMRC (2003, p. 8) outlines six values that lie at the heart of ethical practice, including 'spirit and integrity, reciprocity, respect, equality, survival and protection, responsibility'. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (2010) outlines three key principles underlying ethical research. The first involves consultation, negotiation and mutual understanding; the second, respect for Indigenous knowledge systems, recognition and involvement; and third, there must be tangible benefits and outcomes for Aboriginal people (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2010).

Martin's (2008) doctoral study of Aboriginal regulation for those who are not already part of the rainforest Aboriginal community within far north Queensland, suggests three key conditions that 'outsiders' must do to regulate their interaction with this community. The first is

to talk with honesty, which requires the outsider to 'make sense and not be deceitful or manipulative' (Martin, 2008, p. 121). The second condition refers to the outsider's personal attributes required to get along and cooperate with Aboriginal people in a community. The final condition is to demonstrate trust and respect, whereby outsiders are asked to respect the land and the Elders. The requirement that newcomers show respect through their own behaviour includes being 'open minded' and 'flexible', with a particular emphasis on being a good listener without 'bad ears', rather than being stubborn' or 'hard headed' (Martin, 2008, p. 122). Martin (2008) adds that self-respect comprises part of this final condition and that before one can respect others they need to respect themselves. This requires 'establishing and maintaining relatedness', respecting the land, your Elders, your community, and your family.

Taking those First Steps ... A Journey that Begins Within

Martin (2008) observes that commencing a relationship with the community is indicative of looking within, and attempting to make sense of your identity so that you are able to communicate with honest intent. However, this inward gaze can be burdened with preconceived ideas of how one will be received. Belinda's reflection as a pre-service teacher on how she took that first step, along with Neil's approach in a different setting, both highlight the personal conflicts involved:

With some hesitation, and editing numerous emails to Karla before pressing the send button, I tried to write as much of a true reflection of who I was, and what I was about. I told a story of my background, where I was born, where I spent my childhood years, and where I am now — studying to become a primary school teacher. I also wrote of the reasons why I was contacting her, to improve my understanding and hopefully make connections with Darug people. At the same time, I was nervous about sending out an email to a complete stranger. Firstly, I was nervous that I might get rejected. Secondly, I was nervous that I might have written the wrong thing. Thirdly, I was nervous that I may be sharing too much information about myself. But then a part of me was thinking if you don't ask, you'll never know, and the least someone can say to me is a big fat no. And in that case, you just pick up where you left off and try something new. (Belinda's blog)

While Belinda's blog indicates self-absorption, the following reflections from Neil as a beginning teacher suggest that he is expecting others to introduce him to the community:

Knowing people who can introduce you to others, and who can also verify your interest and vouch for your ethics is important. Aboriginal teachers at my first two schools acted in this capacity for me. Home liaison officers and Aboriginal Education Officers

in schools could also introduce you to parents and other people in the community.

In the context of the classroom, Dewey (cited in Rogers, 2002, p. 855) noted how teachers often rely on authorities 'to make their teaching decisions for them'. Neil is doing something similar in the 'community classroom' as he waits for others to introduce him to Aboriginal people.

Walking Together

Martin (2008, p. 121) identifies the 'personal attributes, characteristics and qualities' needed to work cooperatively. She suggests regulating one's behaviour to demonstrate that you will carry out what you say you will do. Belinda looks at how quickly her actions took speed, and the efforts made to keep true to her word:

I decided to ask Karla [pseudonym] why she was so willing to share so much knowledge with me. She said: 'with you I just feel I know you ... It's funny, sometimes you just have that connection with some people'. Within days, Karla had introduced me to a Darug Elder, Uncle Lennie [pseudonym], to broaden my understanding, and he invited me to attend an upcoming Darug meeting, to 'introduce me to the mob' so that we could meet and get to know each other in person. I accepted the invitation and when I arrived at the meeting, I could see that I was there before him. Rather than sit back and wait for him to arrive and introduce me to the people waiting outside the building, I decided to take the plunge and introduce myself. I used the same framework as I had with Karla and told the people I met where I was from and what I was about. When Uncle Lennie arrived, it was like we were old friends. He gave me a warm hug and introduced me to some of the integral members of the meeting as 'teacher in training who wants to learn the right ways'. At the meeting Uncle Lennie asked me to sit in the front row of the meeting, next to some of the Elders, whereas I would have naturally and happily taken a back seat. I feel almost overwhelmed by the open response I've received, and how quickly my relationships are developing with a part of the community. It seems that my honest approach has been perhaps the most important factor in accepting me as an individual. (Belinda's blog)

Martin's (2008) suggestion of realising that the relationship built with an Aboriginal community is strengthened by the ability for both sides to get along, the fundamental process is that as outsiders, we must consider the implications of our actions. Provided as a way of doing and behaving, Dewey (1933) calls this taking responsibility. He believes that the proficient ability of a learner to engage more deeply in reflective practice is 'to consider the consequences of a projected step'. This realisation is fulfilling the actions and commitment to your relationship with an Aboriginal community.

Most importantly, any work with a community is governed by 'respect' and 'relatedness' (Martin, 2008). Belinda's account of the level of relatedness she has ex-

perienced thus far is discussed below in terms of her respect for her ongoing relationship with the Darug community:

I really enjoy spending time in person with the Darug community. I always leave our meetings feeling a stronger sense of empowerment to take ownership of having regular contact with my Darug friends. The time I spend talking with both Karla and Uncle Lennie helps me to realise so much more than what I could possibly learn from books, and seems to provide me with more meaningful ways to reflect on how my behaviour demonstrates my respect. When I step away from our conversations, and think about the stories that are being shared with me, and see there is still so much I do not know. However, this doesn't deflate me, only ignites my enthusiasm and belief that through these relationships, I can create authentic pathways to apply this learned knowledge, and differentiate the ways I am able to include Aboriginal perspectives for my current and future students. The Darug have acknowledged my role in the classroom will be to apply that understanding by teaching the 'right way'. (Belinda's blog)

Neil also reflects upon how he viewed his behaviour in terms of demonstrating respect, and establishing relatedness by replicating his experience as a beginning teacher, to building relationships with another Aboriginal community for the purposes of including these perspectives in university coursework for pre-service teachers:

For me, the key to making contact with the community is time. 'Being seen' around the community has helped me to form relationships with Aboriginal people. In retrospect, since moving to Sydney, I have devoted three years to meeting people before I had an opportunity to include anything in my teaching practice. It was three years before I felt like I had sufficient knowledge of the local scene to talk about Darug with my students. (Neil)

Conclusion

Making contact with the community depends on *who you are*, and how you present that identity through your attitudes and language. While researchers are able to identify features and levels of reflective practice, they are not able to articulate how these practices can be taught, or even how 'reflective practitioners' can be 'cultivated' (Lee, 2005) outside the offer of a few helpful hints. Indeed, reflective thinking is seen as a cognitive skill where we can think our way through problems to discover solutions (e.g., Dewey, 1933; Rogers, 2002). Alternatively, we suggest a conceptualisation of reflective practice as more closely aligned with language where speaker and listener test and adapt imagined models of each other through negotiated dialogue in order to find satisfactory forms of mutual recognition.

Through these reciprocal exchanges, speaker and listener 'test their own imagined models of the other, repeatedly adjusting the models as responses are processed to find some satisfactory way of comprehending each other' (Langton 1993, p. 83; Harrison, 2004). The knowledge that

is produced through this desire to understand is an effect of the constant negotiation, adaptation and reflections on speech. It is knowledge of our own ways of talking (and teaching) and what these methods do in discourse to get the recognition of others (such as students). The process of testing, reflection and adaptation in speech and teaching is itself reflective practice, and one that only becomes conscious when we analyse language rather than thought.

For beginning teachers, working with the community is about finding people with whom they can talk and work. These teachers need to be conscious of their own attitudes, how they talk to people and how this is perceived by the listener. Most importantly, beginning teachers need to know and be able to identify what they want from themselves, and from Aboriginal people. Some teachers, like Belinda in this study, will find connections quickly and things will fall into place; yet others like Neil will take months, if not years, to find community members with whom they can talk and work comfortably and confidently. Knowing oneself and an awareness of how one relates to others is crucial to the work as a teacher in a community, and therefore to one's own peace of mind and sense of competence.

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