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Chapter 7

De-reifying Learners: Grappling with Student Ethics in Postgraduate Workbased Degrees

Merilyn Childs & Regine Wagner

> This pure toleration of sense and nonsense is justified by the democratic argument that nobody, neither group nor individual, is in possession of the truth and capable of defining what is right and wrong, good and bad. Therefore, all contesting opinions must be submitted to 'the people' for its deliberation and choice. (Marcuse 1965, pg5)

Introduction

Adult education theory makes a number of claims about the value of prior knowledge learners bring to a learning process. Our work as adult educators in a university setting attempted to operationalize these claims by placing value on the prior knowledge and professional practices of adults with whom we worked during the period 1999-2007. We developed three postgraduate workbased learning degrees that were conducted at the nexus of work and learning within the community, adult education and emergency services. Within these programs we established "communities of practice" (Wenger 1998) within which learners and academics represented their practices, conducted research, developed new knowledge and produced applied outcomes in public spaces. As educators, we invited student/professionals to engage in dialogue and public processes of discovery and problem solving. The very nature of this work meant that there were times of exposure to narratives about professional practices that were highly problematic. Sometimes those narratives came close to breaching legislative frameworks, and other times they simply resonated painfully against our own deeply held convictions about oppression, injustice and social exclusion.

The educators of teachers and educators often ask their students to apply critical reflection to their work. In writing this chapter, we engaged in critical reflection about our educational practices, using the method of "critical incident analysis", as applied to two incidents that occurred with adult learners. We used this analysis as a basis for exploring tolerance in adult learning environments. We drew on the philosophical insights of Herbert Marcuse (1965) as a way of teasing out the dilemmas that have sometimes occurred when we have attempted to value a learner's professional practice (as a principle), and the learner's professional practice turned out to be, in our view, socially unjust (in practice).

Critical Reflection- practicing what we preach

As lecturers in adult education, we worked in undergraduate and postgraduate degrees within which adult educators were encouraged to engage in critical thinking as well as critical theory. For example, the first unit that students studied in the Bachelor of Adult Education that we developed at the University of Western Sydney (Australia) was a unit called "Critical Thinking in Adult Education". At postgraduate level, during the first semester of our work-related degree, students completed a unit called "Valuing Professional Practice in Postgraduate Studies" during which they articulated what might be seen as "espoused theories" about their work (Argyris and Schon 1974). They drew on visual, written and verbal narratives of their practices and interrogating these from a wide range of perspectives, including the practice guiding principles that underpinned our work as social pedagogues (Wagner and Childs 2000). In addition, we asked students to identify critical incidents in their work that might construct, through their telling, moments of disjuncture (Jarvis 1992) that hold within them new possibilities and practices.

It therefore seemed reasonable that as adult educators ourselves, we applied to our own professional practices the various tools we asked our students to use. Consequently, we turned a critical gaze towards our own educational practices, and through critical incidents, we took the opportunity to talk aloud about the 'adult learner' where learning occurs at the nexus of work and higher education. Adult education theorists have long engaged in dialogue about the need for adult educators to foster 'critically reflective practice' amongst educators. However, as Childs (2005) argued elsewhere, "it is by no means the case that this dialogue is clear or in agreement." (2005, p560) In addition, as Privet (2001) pointed out, in his review of the literature on critical reflection in adult education,

> A survey of the adult learning literature of the last 25 years employing the term "critical reflection" reveals a bewildering array of interpretations and applications, (Privet 2001, page unknown, cited in Childs ibid, p.260).

However, this "bewildering array" indicates a quest to develop the 'reflective practitioner' able to find ways and means whereby thought-action becomes deliberately and deliberatively linked as an iterative process. Well know to Western educators are authors such as Mezirow (1991), Brookfield (1995), radical feminist writers such as bell hooks (1994) and Mayo & Thompson (1994) and others such as Bright (1996 amongst many).

Much of the literature argues that a key quality of a professional educator is the capacity to engage in critical reflection. A teacher is able to examine their own practices in the light of public discourse, research findings, policy, received wisdom, professional development, student feedback, and the views of the "other": peers, employers, experts, and sometimes parents, media, popular culture and 'the man on the street'. In the attempt to establish critical reflection as a process that can be taught to adults, many

different methods have been adopted. One of the problems of critical reflection is that it sometimes used as a form of confession (Foley 2002). When tangled up with impulses towards personal growth, pop-psychology and individuality, "reflection" may be limited to the narrow perspective of the *self* as the sole reference point.

In our work, we asked learners to provide narratives of critical incidents recalled from their practices. By critical incidents we have referred to "flash-points that illustrate in an electrifying instant some key problematic aspects of the teacher's role and which contain, in the same instant, the solution" (Woods 1993, 357 cited in Angelides 2001). Once recalled, we have asked learners to apply to them an analytical process developed by Angelides (ibid) drawing on earlier work by Tripp (1993). These questions aimed to connect critical incidents to reflection with an analytical tool (not merely one's own moral or ethical frameworks).

In this chapter, we have adapted Angelides' approach; and applied it discursively to our own critical incidents. The adapted questions are as follows:

1. What were the contexts that shaped the incident?
2. What was the critical incident?
3. Whose interests are served, or denied, by the actions of these critical incidents?
4. How can the critical incident be analysed?
5. What actions can the educator take to respond to the incident?

1. What were the contexts that shaped the incident?

First, the critical incidents (recounted below) were shaped by the view that adult education provides a vehicle whereby a learner's prior professional practices can be recognized and valued. The value we placed on all things "prior" was used politically as a way of mediating the disadvantages caused by a university system. Investigating hurdles of access to higher education Peters, Pokorny and Sheibani (1999, 1) suggested

> For an adult to set aside her/his experience on entering university is therefore not only to waste a resource which can benefit both the individual and others around them but also to take away the person's identity and turn learning into a mechanistic and superficial process which does not engage the student in praxis.

'Prior' knowledge was recognized at entry to the postgraduate course, and valued in many ways – one being our use of a pedagogy of 'openness' whereby open debate and dialogue about work was encouraged. This is by no means a new idea, and has been discussed by many authors attempting to break down the many borders that structure and limit learning within institutions (Giroux 1992).

Secondly, there was a historic basis for our pedagogy. Despite the conceptual and philosophical diversity in adult education and learning theory most seminal writers perceive important differences between adult learners and the contexts of their learning (eg Rogers 2002, Knowles 1984, Freire 1970, Mezirow 1991) and other forms of education, especially school education. Whereas in school education, the curriculum, societal norms and expectations, and institutional requirements represent dominant factors in the educational process, in most adult education concepts and practices, the adult learner takes centre stage, both as participant in and manager of their own learning (Long 1990). The adult learner is seen to be different from a young person mainly in two ways, i)"adults enter into an educational activity with both greater volume and a different quality of experience from youth" (Knowles op cit, 10), and ii) " … adults engage in learning as a result of their own volition. It may be that the circumstances prompting this learning are external to the learner (…), but the decision to learn is the learner's" (Brookfield 1986, 9-10), and they can expect to be treated accordingly. Within this tradition, the adult educator facilitates learning rather than teaching, and to work with, walk with, respect and value the 'learner' as equal. "Adult education … consists of all those forms of education that treat the student participants as adults- capable, experienced, responsible, mature and balanced people" (Rogers op cit, 55).

The need to recognize learners' experiences as part of an educational activity has spawned several forms of educational practice, such as experiential learning, problem based learning (for example, Boud & Walker 1991, Boud, Cohen & Walker 1993, Boud & Feletti 1991) and workbased learning (eg Boud & Solomon 2001, Wagner, Childs & Houlbrook 2001). All expressedly seek to link learning from experience with meaningful new insights by way of reflection, whether critical or affirmative. Being learner- rather than curriculum- driven, the resulting value-based educational practices vary between educators and learning contexts and a rich culture of adult education has developed that is responsive to social and economic change and inclusive of a wide variety of institutional and non-institutional settings.

Thirdly, our work is in harmony with recent developments in higher education in terms of the emergence of workbased learning models, particularly in postgraduate arenas. Embracing the 'life long learning needs' of workers; higher education providers are now aiming to 'add value' to education by establishing a direct link between recognizing experience (Childs and Wagner 1997), learning and improving the work practices of the learner, a link traditionally associated with vocational rather than higher education (Wagner et al 2001).

The link creates opportunities and challenges for the academics/educators and the students/workers. The new 'academic classroom', where students' work forms part of the curriculum (Childs 1997) exposes to the critical gazes of academics and co-learners a complex web of individual, organizational and political

factors underlying work practices and workplace cultures. As the students/worker's experiences becomes intentionally problematised (Wagner et al 2001) critical incidents can occur that have, in our experiences, shattered at least temporarily, fundamental belief in the 'capable, experienced, responsible, mature and balanced' adult learner.

2. What was the critical incident?

We have chosen two critical incidents from our work to form the basis of this discussion as they represented "flash-points" that illustrated through "an electrifying instant" incidents that set us apart from, and at odds with, the implicit or explicit professional views of the learner. The first critical incident occurred as part of the Graduate Certificate of Social Sciences (Emergency Services) and involved a group of male emergency services professionals. It did not take place within one event, but occurred across a number of different situations, and a period of about a year. The classes were all male. The incident recounted here is therefore exemplary and summative.

The second critical incident occurred as part of the Graduate Diploma of Social Sciences (Community Services), and involved a group of youth work professionals. Students in this course were employed in a wide range of community service organizations, including government departments, community-based organisation and private sector service providers. Client services ranged from children- and family services to aged care, housing and legal services. The incidents are described below, as "Black and hot" (incident one) and "I am the youth worker, I make the rules!" (incident two). In subsequent discussion, these names were shortened to "Hot" and "Rules" for ease of recognition.

Black and hot (incident one)

Part 1

I am standing in the sun and the air is full of excitement and anticipation. We are about to take part in a team-based action-learning event. All the learners are male, for this is a male-dominated industry. I have long accepted that working with this industry is much like my childhood- rough, working class, take-me-or-leave me, and sexist in a good old-fashioned way that I understand and can laugh at. That's why I'm good at this, I think…But this year it's different. I'm different. And some of the guys are "new" type guys. They have professional wives, and want to see some blokey things change. Males pulling on wet suits surround me, joking. One is taking orders for coffee. 'How do you want it?" he asks. "Black and hot like my women" another answers.

Part 2

I have invited an international guest to speak to learners about diversity in the industry in the United Kingdom. During a discussion one of the learners argues that women cause problems with the crews under his command. "But my men won't work with a woman" he says to the international guest. "They'll ring me up and say- I'm not working with that slag on my shift". And our guest says "And what do you say to them?" "What can I say?" he replies. "I put the woman on another shift".

"I am the youth worker, I make the rules!" (incident two).

A youth worker related the following story:

> *You know we have a number of rules at our refuge. You need them to keep things under control, after all we are dealing with pretty hopeless clients here, the one's that other places have put in the too hard basket. Anyway, one of the rules says that kids cannot make phone calls without any supervision. You never know what they get up to, scheming little buggers. The other day Paul asked me to use the phone and when I insisted I needed to be in the office supervising him, he chucked an absolute fit. Kicked the wall, swore, yelled and screamed and all that. Ah well, I told him he was a free agent, he could walk to the nearest phone box, bit far but if he really wanted to he could. Except, of course, now that he gotten so angry and swore at me I had to ground him for a couple of days, that's the rule. After that, he was free to walk to the phone. Jeez, you should have heard him, ranting and raving about how we were all fascists and that. Well, I told him, this wasn't a prison you know, if he wanted to leave he could just walk out the door, it was his choice. Of course he wouldn't be able to come back. That's the rule.*

3. Whose interests are served, or denied, by the actions of these critical incidents?

The sexist and racist remarks made by adult learners in "Hot" took place within the hearing of the female educator, who was a senior lecturer. "Hot" revealed a view of women that had previously alarmed the writer, but had not been verbalised in such an explicit and unavoidably confronting manner. It might seem at first blush that the incident might have been aimed to put the educator 'in her place'; but in truth it was more complex. It was designed to indicate publicly that the educator was "one of us", a respected and accepted member of a masculine community. Not a "duck on the pond"- someone alien and requiring caution and silence- but someone with whom one could relax, be oneself, and be a bloke. Beneath the power of acceptance was the message that the conditions of acceptance were set; these learners like a woman who can take a joke, fit in, and have a raucous laugh, and this woman could do that. It was partly why she was there.

"Rules" formed part of a course segment about describing practices where adult learners were encouraged to relate their experience before engaging in analysis and critique. "Rules" illustrated conflicting interests between welfare workers and their clients that lead to dehumanising and punitive practices and the potential for unwitting or conscious collusion by educators. In this instance, the adult learner presented the story as a challenge to the presumably practically inexperienced academic. Educators in the course repeatedly position practical knowledge as equal to academic knowledge and they were being tested. Ambivalent towards university learning and its inherent elitism, the learner wanted to force the issue. Were we authentic or were we rhetorical? Wanting to demonstrate authenticity and equality and walking the talk of 'good' adult education practice, the educators attempted to engage in a rational debate about rules, their purpose and their impacts instead of 'judging' the practice. Predictably that was seen as 'talking through our heads' and in the end, the young people in this particular refuge would continue to be dehumanised. The overlapping power structures in the triad

of client, worker/student and educator in this incident conspired to achieve one thing: the continued oppression of the weakest member.

4. How can the critical incident be analysed?

We faced a practical contradiction. Here was a messy unfolding of democratic learning processes, which we had purposefully created. Over the years we had read Ellsworth's (1999) question: "why doesn't this feel empowering?" when she considered the limitations of an empowering learning process within an American College classroom. We had also long considered Williams' (1993) thesis that the voices of female experts could be silenced and marginalized within pedagogy most favoured by radical educators – the open and engaged classroom. We had, in our separate practices, initiated a "pedagogy of hope" (Freire 1994), which at its heart, trusted in the learning process to develop partisan, just and deeply humanistic individuals. We wanted to be able to work at the nexus of work and learning, value professional knowledge whilst also engaging in criticism and criticality. However, we wished to do so without adhering to a "naïve eclecticism which draws a pinch of criticality from ideology critique here and a soupcon of criticality from constructivism there, and which then combines these unreflectively, will sooner or later lead to a breakdown in communication and goodwill among those involved" (Brookfield, 1998, p130).

It was clear to us, at a surface level at least, that these narratives spoke of serious social justice and even legislative issues that we felt troubled or upset by, as potentially did some of our other students. We were concerned about the pitfalls of 'benevolent neutrality', that is an iterative space within which we appeared as educators to be neutral and accepting of the ways in which student/workers named the world. To help us explore this dilemma we followed Brookfield's (2002a and 2002b) lead, and revisited Marcuse, particularly his thoughts about "tolerance". Marcuse (op cit, p1) argued that when tolerance "is turned from an active into a passive state, from practice to non-practice" then it becomes possible for oppression to be tolerated. Is this what we had done? Were we in fact engaged in a kind of "non-practice"? In arguing the 'necessity for tolerance' as a precondition for finding the way to freedom, Marcuse (op cit) advised,

> [….] tolerance cannot be indiscriminate and equal with respect to the contents of expression, neither in word nor in deed; it cannot protect false words and wrong deeds which demonstrate that they contradict and counteract the possibilities of liberation. Such indiscriminate tolerance is justified in harmless debates, in conversation, in academic discussion (sic): it is indispensable in the scientific enterprise, in private religion. But society cannot be indiscriminate where the pacification of existence, where freedom and happiness themselves are at stake: here certain things cannot be said, certain ideas cannot be expressed, certain policies cannot be proposed, certain behavior cannot be permitted without making tolerance an instrument for the continuation of servitude. (3)

As we reflected on our separate critical incidents we came to see that our struggle to advance the cause of prior learning within the university sector had lead us inexorably to a contradictory position. In defending the value of experience, we had inadvertently developed an *ipso facto* and therefore indiscriminate tolerance of expertise and knowledge gained informally outside the academe; and professional practice had become reified to some degree. This version of institutional criticality had de-emphasized the critical nature of leaner-educator relationship, or of learner's experience, and over time had emphasized the radicalism of the learning process itself within the straightjacket of an elitist institution. At the practical level we had allowed our criticality to be tolerant, and as such, we had weakened our capacity to speak to experience with a critical voice, or with criticality, let alone a questioning one. We had confused the 'ad hominem' in our focus on the learning process with the 'ad rem' of critically evaluative engagement with the learners practice

"Rules" for example, reflected the constructed nature of the relationship between the student/worker and the educators, constructed by a complex set of factors, some individual, some organisational and some structural. For example, the ambivalent perception of 'the university' as elitist on one side and the learner's aspiration to belong on the other engendered an on-going struggle between the presumed representatives of 'practice' and 'theory'. Inherent in the relationship also, were notions of class divisions and a resentful, culturally fostered attitude towards 'intellectuals'. Even more complex, the class backgrounds and actions of both academic/educators suggest the presence of two driving forces. The first was the "hidden injuries of class", (Sennett and Cobb 1993), whereby class identification was strongly framed with the student/workers. The second was the 'internalised oppressor', (Freire op cited) in that the oppressive iterations of the student/workers resonated with the academic/educators own socializations. The untrained youth worker, who was recruited on the basis of experience, had raised a teenager in precarious social and economic conditions. Her attitudinal 'toughness' embraced disciplinarian, authoritarian practices because they were familiar and taken for granted. Wanting to protect the young person from 'going off the rails', she fell back on what she knew and what was in her mind had served her well. After all, she had been employed as youth worker, surely that was proof of her expertise.

In "Hot" 'noli me tangere'– or let's not go there; let's not ask questions here; let's not talk about it- was an unspoken rule that created a sense that something important and unrecoverable would be lost should the sexist and racist joke be resisted, or should it be pointed out that the decision to disadvantage a woman employee was not only sexist but illegal. The shared sense of closeness, proximity, inclusiveness actually created a culture within which what was *included* was socially unjust, and what was *excluded* was the possibility of resistance, change or critique. In this incident, the educator colluded with the systems of oppression, and her expert status *as a female* was rendered insignificant by a white male culture.

As the educators faced abusive practices or verbiage, they tended to respond in the moment by relying on an unwillingness to break the unwritten 'contract' between learner and educator, overemphasizing tolerance and falling well short of criticality. The educators conspired to create a climate of 'noli me tangere'. To add insult to injury, as Mayo (1999, 140) observed, "teachers who experiment with democratic approaches are often perceived as less credible by their students who often equate intellectual authority with traditional didactic approaches". Adding to this, there existed the absence of a class, race or gender analysis within both educational spaces, and this created a "speaking space" that enabled student/workers to speak their minds unchallenged at one level, but at another level discouraged debate.

5. What actions can the educator take to respond to the incident?

In "Hot" the educator had struck a bargain with the devil of tolerance as a trade off for an imagined situation in which she might weave critical perspectives *sometime in the future*. She focused on the bigger policy and research agenda as a way of negotiating a softer deal in the local and immediate contexts within which she also worked. She later wrote uncomfortably about the incident:

> *Had I accepted those rules too fully, and thus marginalized and rendered silent the possibility of critique and resistance? Or had I, through individual tolerance, created a space within which organizational and political change might be made possible? Was I a traitor or a Trojan horse? Or was I nothing? An invisible woman-chameleon blurring against the skyline because of my skills at "fitting in"? I felt corrupted, and I felt I had colluded. I wanted to end the invisibility of views not represented in these incidents, yet not with the "tut tut tut" of what would become a marginalized feminist voice. [Childs, notes November 2004]*

In "Rules" the educator had remained silent about abusive practice in order that the learner/educator relationship not be undermined for the 'future good' the relationship may deliver. As she later wrote:

> *Were we facing a conflict between the rules of ethical practice in adult education and ethical practice in welfare work? Or was this a clash of personal value systems between individuals? Were we concerned more with our professional standing and acceptance by a group of students than with the protection of a vulnerable young person? In the end, we did collude by our rationalisation of the issue. [Wagner, Grad Dip Review 2003]*

Marcuse (ibid) argued that "even progressive movements threaten to turn into their opposite to the degree to which they accept the rules of the game". Had we accepted the rules of the game and therefore compromised and confused our capacity for criticality? Marcuse concluded that the answer to the dilemmas of society does not lie in "a dictatorship or elite, no matter how intellectual and intelligent, but the struggle for a real democracy. Part of this struggle is the fight against an ideology of tolerance

which, in reality, favours and fortifies the conservation of the status quo of inequality and discrimination." But in our minds at least, it could not lie in a process whereby criticality was pursued to the degree that a learning process, or a person within it, was dehumanised. Thus we had faltered in our search for the philosophical bottom line of our work at the meeting point between a humanizing pedagogy that is also a pedagogy of criticality.

At its most pragmatic level, we had engaged in a form of "non-action" whereby the "trade-offs" we had both made had created a space in which oppression and socially unjust actions could be represented or spoken uncritically. Our trade-offs were un-vocalized; spoken as silent inner voices that acted to mediate the discomfort and disjuncture of the moment. Thus they were self-referential, the very thing we had asked learners to contest of themselves. Whereas we had intended to create learning spaces within which the expert knowledge of learners and educators could be valued; at critical moments of disjuncture we had silenced our expert voices or colluded in their silencing. As we use this analysis to establish new practices, central to our concerns will be to ensure that we develop better strategies for ensuring that this incorporates the possibility of a critical voice, and the voice of criticality. This is likely to involve a weakening of boundaries between protected and public spaces, ie bringing the voices of the oppressed into the classroom. In fact, new practices will require a review of the relationship between educators and learners.

Conclusion

Criticality has little meaning if it does not lead to changed actions (Arendt 1958). Because of analysis, we took a range of actions- some local, some national- through research, policy formation, and teaching/learning practices. In terms of the latter, the industries, contexts, value-systems and knowledge domains within which we both work shaped our actions. Locally, we have begun to rework the social relations of our learning processes in order that criticality is reclaimed, the authority of critical questions be reinstated, and knowledge (regardless of its source or expression) be open to interrogation. We have begun the process of substituting "liberating tolerance" (Marcuse op cit, 11) in our dialogue with adult learners in place of the "indiscriminate tolerance", we had, over time, developed.

Ultimately, working at the nexus of work and learning will continue to mean that we will make compromises of many kinds. Learning will remain a many-voiced endeavour and dialogue will be our dirty word. Valuing professional knowledge will remain a key principle of our work and we will continue to resist dominant forms of elitism as constructed in higher education within Australia. As adult educators, we continue to struggle with defining the boundaries between 'good' tolerance and 'bad tolerance'. Invariably it involves ethical disagreements and moral dilemmas. Our use of critical reflection and critical incident methodology has provided a useful means by which our struggles at this

nexus can contribute to debates about the changing nature of education work, the role of the academic, and the place of professional knowledge within the academy.

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