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Recontextualising the Award: Developing a Critical Pedagogy in Indigenous Studies

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Abstract: In this paper, I evaluate the politics of teaching awards, and recontextualise the receipt of this accolade from within the framework of a collaborative and collegial teaching and learning environment. My aim is reflect critically about the relations of power that endorse and confer teaching awards. I address this in the context of a developing pedagogy that depends upon collaboration, the sharing of Indigenous knowledge and worldviews, and mutual respect, for the effective delivery of courses in the discipline of Aboriginal Studies in Australia to a diverse student body. Drawing from work in the area of critical pedagogy, the paper outlines some of the practices and theoretical applications introduced by staff, with a view to foregrounding Indigenous history, knowledge, and culture, and inspiring students to think critically about the issues surrounding contemporary race relations in Australia.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Aboriginal Studies

“... How might pedagogy be understood as a political and moral practice rather than a technical strategy in the service of corporate culture?”

(Giroux, 2006, 6:2).

“My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them. Educating is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness.”

(hooks, 2003 p.xiv).

Introduction

IN 2005, I received a University award for teaching and learning. The application for the award followed a recommendation that this accolade would serve well in the advancement of my career. Receipt of this award inspired me to think more critically about what had long been of interest, i.e. the politics of pedagogy in higher education: about what we do, what purpose it serves, and how it can possibly be done better; in short, the nature of pedagogy and its capacity, as bell hooks acknowledges, for social transformation, for inspiring hope, and for critical thinking about social injustice. As an evidentiary document testifying my proficiency as an educator, through student testimonials, peer references, and my own corroborative statements, the teaching award provoked questions, and concerns, about the nature of applying for, and receiving formal and public congratulations for doing well what educators are supposed to do well. In the context of my particular teaching and learning environ-

ment at an Indigenous teaching and research unit, where collaboration is paramount to the development of a specific and rigorous Indigenous pedagogy, the award's personal acclaim inspired consideration of its political underpinnings. This paper addresses the cultural politics of awards, and raises questions about the award as a prized cultural object in relation to neo-liberal endorsements of the primacy of individual achievement. In particular, I want to address some of the issues surrounding my receipt of this accolade, and to consider other possibilities for re-discursifying the award given my workplace comprises a teaching team of highly collaborative and collegial Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics. I will also consider the politics of collaboration within the context of Indigenous studies, and will map a developing praxis within my Unit, outlining its aims to deflect from individual self-interest while working from within the very discourse that promotes self-acclamation.

This paper is a salute to the combined efforts within my workplace where the multi-layered sites of teaching and learning present frequent challenges and opportunities. I am a non Indigenous educator working with Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff from diverse disciplinary and cultural backgrounds who teach Aboriginal Studies to Indigenous, domestic Australian, International and Study Abroad students, the latter largely comprising students from the United States, but also students from Japan, Korea, and more recently, Europe. Differences of culture, class and history provide us with challenges in delivering courses in the discipline of Aboriginal Studies. This disciplinary area focuses on the history, culture and contemporary lives of Aboriginal people and the

on-going effects of colonial policy. The diversity of our student cohort also offers opportunities for engagement within a teaching and learning environment that values collaboration and reciprocity as central to the development of a critical praxis, and where we may learn from one another about other histories and knowledge outside of our own frames of reference.

Aboriginal Studies is a discipline that assumes particular relevance at this point in time. Indigenous issues have resurfaced on the political agenda following many years of attack on revisionist histories at a governmental level. As I write, the newly elected Labor Government plans its public and formal apology to Aboriginal people for the Stolen Generations, which symbolically, at least, will serve to redress the official abnegation of Indigenous issues.¹ The development of a critical pedagogy in Aboriginal Studies is challenging for students who, as a result of the backlash against Indigenous histories, often have little or no knowledge of Australian history, or colonial histories elsewhere, and are imbued with the attitudes of neo-conservative political agendas that foreground individualism through pervasive neo-liberal ideologies. For teachers in the area of Indigenous Studies, the application of a critical pedagogy demands a continual rethinking of what it is we are trying to do and how we can do it better.

Collaboration and its accompanying exigencies are central to the on-going development of a reflexive and critical teaching and learning praxis. In our Unit, ideas for collaboration are often the progeny of quick cups of coffee, emails, corridor repartee, the occasional shared lunch, and staff meetings. It is at these random moments, often, that methodologies are revisited, and emergent issues of interest signposted for inclusion into course content. At such moments, strategies are often put in place to manage the tensions between a pedagogy embedded in the belief of a socially just and ethical pedagogy that addresses racism and the on-going colonial relations that continue to shape and inform Australian culture, and the demands of corporate culture which have come to regulate much of what we do and how we go about doing it. This is not to suggest our efforts are haphazard; on the contrary, it is the serendipitous moments of interaction that often provide a basis for creative thinking, a platform for future planning, and the potential for revision and change.

The teaching award, ostensibly a tribute to individual effort, is thus in my case, a direct consequence of collaborative energies and activities, and the generous sharing of cultural knowledge, political view-

points, and historical analysis, rather than a testimonial signifying one has inspired enough students to support claims that one is a competent educator. The application for, and acceptance of this accolade warrants a critical evaluation in order to fathom how this salute to individual achievement and competitiveness might be more meaningful or useful, or how it can signify more broadly or productively for purposes beyond its immediate and apparent individualist preoccupations. I want to consider how a re-conceptualisation of the teaching award might intervene in the power structures that organise its production and consumption. My aim is to stage a reconfiguring of the award by extracting it from its individualist significations to endorse the combined labours of many, rather than the concerted efforts of one. In doing so, I raise questions about the production of subjectivity through publicly acclaimed testimonials to achievement by thinking about what kinds of subject positions are produced through the conferral of teaching awards and how such subject positions are rendered compliant with the forces of conferral. Also, importantly, I'd like to consider the often unstated roles that students play as contributors to pedagogical processes.

Before I attempt to address these issues, I want to map the ideological foundations of the teaching award. I will outline the collaborative effort that produced the award within in a discursive formation where Enlightenment notions of the rational individual are both invoked and contested within a framework of Indigenous knowledge. It is here that teaching staff encourage students, and particularly Indigenous students, to achieve the 'prizes' of knowledge through the acquirement of another accolade, the university degree, while simultaneously encouraging critical thinking of the politics that enable this for a 'chosen few'. For many Indigenous students, the teaching of Aboriginal history by privileged educators to a cohort of mainly privileged learners can be daunting, as Martin Nakata states, recalling his own experience within the institutions of western learning: "[W]hen I started studying, I had to read everything at least five times before I could understand a word...I couldn't believe there was so much to know" (Nakata, 2003, p.138). Nakata's deconstruction of the processes of his own education as an Indigenous scholar are inspiring, and as his prodigious writings in the area of pedagogy inform much of what we do, I will elaborate on his work later. Indigenous students represent roughly 5% of our student body. It is these students who comprise our priority

¹ The "Stolen Generation" refers to the children of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were removed from their families and communities from the late nineteenth century until the 1960s in Australia as a result of government legislation. Details of the policies and their effects were documented in the 1997 Bringing Them Home Report. (Details can be located at www.austlii.edu.au/cgibin/sinodisp/au/other/IndigLRes/stolen/prelim.html?query=-%20bringing%20them%20home)

in terms of the Unit's vision statement², which entails vigorous recruitment efforts and the implementation of programmes that will facilitate an increase in this figure through their attention and focus on the knowledge and experience of Indigenous people.

The teaching of Aboriginal Studies involves a struggle to decentre self-interest by foregrounding collaboration, unity, and community as central tenets of a developing pedagogical praxis. In stating this, my intention is not to invoke a colonial fantasy of harmony and unity within my teaching Unit; we are certainly not removed from the relations of power that attempt to position us in competitive and often, unproductive ways! It so happens, though, that within the teaching team there is a concerted effort to develop a pedagogy of knowledge-sharing that acknowledges different ways of knowing and being, and moves towards a continual reshaping of epistemologies. Such a praxis is driven by a two-fold aim: firstly, to foreground Indigenous knowledge, history, and culture, and secondly, to help students acquire critical skills to think about issues of race and white privilege and their positionality in relation to this.

In thinking about the politics surrounding teaching awards, and the development of a critical pedagogy through consultation, collaboration and intellectual respect, this paper is not a high-minded attempt to deflect recognition for effort, or indeed, to affect a pseudo-collegiality that takes place in some ego-free domain; on the contrary, disagreement and the negotiations accompanying institutional demands are endemic to our daily interactions! It is rather a salute to my experience of collaboration and the support of my colleagues in an environment that invites, and sometimes demands us to be competitive and non-collegial. I want to begin by examining the award as a cultural object that provoked the genesis for this paper.

The Cultural Politics of Awards

Awards act like a discursive template for individual success or achievement. An award states clearly the recipient's name, title, and institutional affiliation, the institutional identity of the award giver, the act for which one is being awarded, and often, an insignia of authentication by the benefactor. Awards are culturally coveted objects. They represent a 'feather in one's cap', a flattering pat on the back that is often pragmatically encoded with the required institutional ticks in boxes. Academic teaching awards are public signifiers of individual effort or achievement that may be extended to represent a unit, faculty or department, but in the end, provide a concrete testimonial to the individual recipient

through inscribed designation, and in many cases, through institutional or public recognition.

Despite the cultural value of awards, they reflect, endorse, and reproduce the politics of individualism. They are testimonials to effort, to some degree, but often reflect the market-driven demands of corporate competitiveness that underpin neo-liberal thinking, and structure all institutional sites in contemporary liberal democracies. The politics of individualism constitute a discourse that devalues collective efforts and indeed, can impose punitive measures on non-compliant subjects. As Giroux notes, "we are in an era where the power of corporate ideologies to mobilise consent is expressed through the mantra of individual self-interest and self-promotion, where one's non-success is seen as a 'failure', where 'poverty is now viewed as a crime, and racism as a personal prejudice'" (Giroux, 2005).

Giroux marks the de-institutionalising of failure, poverty and racism, and their convenient relocation back to the individual; subjects who do not or cannot comply with the demands of 'success' in an increasingly corporate and competitive world are scripted as 'losers', and the realities of poverty and racism divested of their discursive construction. Under this rubric, the individual is held responsible for the asymmetries of power that produce subjectivities. Social transgressions such as unemployment or the inability to function within the prescribed social milieu are removed from any geopolitical location, and the individual blamed for 'failure', or applauded for 'success.' The public award for effort becomes a tool with which power structures can be effectively maintained, and can continue to position academics as compliant in the power relations that designate subject positions. The violence that produces 'failure' is safely secreted, and 'successful' subjects discursively positioned through the visible signifiers of success, authorised as 'winners' in the liberal discourse of individualism. This discourse iterates familiar bourgeois-liberal mantras that suggest 'anyone can do well if they try', and an abundant litany of similar invocations that obscure the political difference between the concept of choice, which decrees the Enlightenment universality of free will, and the practice of human agency which involves decisions made by *discursively situated* socio-cultural subjects. The teaching award constitutes a "technique of discipline" (Foucault, 1977). In other words, it regulates subjectivities, and induces regimes of self-discipline.

What requires consideration is the relationship of the award, as a validated cultural object, to the power structures that both inform and produce subjectivity within academia. An award is a testament to the re-

² 'To achieve distinction in the education and professional development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with non-Aboriginal peoples who will embrace and promote cultural diversity in the enrichment of all communities' (see Woolyungah Indigenous Centre website: www.uow.edu.au/wic/vision/index.html)

lations of power that maintain hierarchical arrangements between the awardee, the awarded, and those not awarded; as suggested, fundamental to neo-liberal individualism is the dualism of winner/loser. As microcosmic emblems of the wider, dominant relations of power, awards represent 'truths'; they make statements, claims, and announcements, and can be understood, in deference to Foucault's propositions, as part of the system of ordered procedures that, as effects of power, regulate, distribute and circulate statements, (Tallack, 1995, pp.66, 67) and constitute 'truths'. Above all, the award for individual success often erases the conditions of its possibility; it appears as a 'natural' object in culture, seemingly apolitical or un-ideological, merely a salute to effort that can be achieved by all who try. In my case, the award *depended* upon collaborative effort; as a non-Indigenous educator teaching in the area of Indigenous Studies, I am frequently the seeker of knowledge, dependent upon its input for my teaching, and reliant on my Indigenous colleagues for sources and resources that will complement and enhance my teaching praxis.

Collaboration in Context

To Collaborate: From f. col: together + labōrā: to work.

To work in conjunction with another or others, to co-operate; esp. in a literary or artistic production, or the like. (<http://www.oed.com/>)

Collaborations are multi-dimensional sites of collective energy, frustration, patience, creativity, determination and effort, all of which contribute to a vision towards a particular end. They are not, however, combined efforts that occur outside of power relations (in fact, effective collaborations can be instrumental in reworking relations of power). *PAR* (Participatory Action Research) is a pedagogical method widely applied in Latin America and described as a "methodological stance rooted in the belief that valid knowledge is produced only in collaboration and in action" (Fine, 2008). *PAR* is a methodology developed by Orlando Fals Borda, and Paulo Freire, whose work is taught on one of our undergraduate subjects. *PAR*'s usefulness in promoting Indigenous pedagogy is clear:

[T]his approach serves to deconstruct the western positivist research paradigm that is, and has always been, antithetical to Indigenous ways of coming to knowledge on many levels; theoretically, cognitively, practically, and spiritually. *PAR* can, therefore, be quite significant to the inclusion of indigenous epistemology in the discourse of research.

(Sinclair, 2003)

PAR refutes the overseeing eye of western authority and concepts of singular authorship or expertise. Its focus is on participation between teacher and learner, and is underscored by a democratising approach to learning that encourages reflection on the multi-faceted components of subjectivity and the relationship between power and knowledge. *PAR*'s focus is to enable learners to understand the relationship between their own subject position and the forces that regulate social reality and shape their lives, and to make sense of these through a pedagogical framework that allows teachers and learners to become interchangeable in a mutually beneficial context of dialogue, listening and understanding. It seeks to produce what Freire (1970) calls *conscientization*, an effect of participatory learning that leads towards critical consciousness by allowing learners to understand the discourses that structure their reality, and in turn, to be active in the transformation of those discourses. In the context of developing a critical pedagogy, *PAR* offers a mutually beneficial approach to teaching and learning that is inclusive and respectful. The application of this model can extend beyond the teaching space and invite and incorporate community members as well as students to be actively involved in teaching and learning. For educators, the challenge is to balance the task of facilitating student learning with the positioning of ourselves as learners, to cite Freire and Macedo:

the educator should never allow his or her active and curious presence to transform learners' presences into shadows. Neither can the educator be the shadow of learners. The educator has to stimulate learners to live a critically conscious presence in the pedagogical and historical process. (1987, p.140)

PAR is then not merely a theoretical or methodological prescription, but a guide for pedagogical praxis that can motivate social transformation through the exchange and reflection of ideas, personal histories and experiences in combination with a curriculum that encourages dialogue, visual learning, wide reading, listening and reflexivity.

Although various applications of this model of practice provide inspiration for a collective vision in the field of teaching and learning in Aboriginal Studies, they must be considered in view of Martin Nakata's warning that collaborative or participatory approaches, no matter how well intended, will invariably skew knowledge to the advantage of the non-Indigenous researcher. Nakata's formulation for Aboriginal knowledge and the application of a culturally relevant Aboriginal pedagogy in university courses is encapsulated in his view of how western knowledge achieves primacy:

Scientific research is embedded in mental abstractions, hypothetical constructs and illusions concerning the natural world. It is both imbued with personal bias and riddled with unacknowledged and unrecognised subjectivities. What scientists 'know' or 'investigate', and what they consequently 'understand' about the objects of their study, is built up using the ideas, images and shapes they have recorded within their emerging disciplines. (Nakata, 2007, p.30)

So while *PAR*'s liberatory education provides a sound ethical and practical foundation for an effective participatory praxis, Nakata's work is aimed more specifically at the practicalities of Indigenous pedagogy in the Australian context, and offers a caution born of his experience as an Indigenous scholar and educator concerned about the appropriation of knowledge by Western knowledge systems.

Much of Nakata's work deals with the relationship between knowledge and power, between Western knowledge systems and Indigenous knowledge, between science and anthropology, and their inquiries and proclamations about Indigenous peoples, specifically Torres Strait Islander people. His work is particularly relevant to non-Indigenous educators engaged in teaching and learning contexts in the discipline of Indigenous Studies, who must, he insists, be educated, persuaded and shaped by Indigenous academics (Nakata, 2004, p.4). Nakata's exhortation for non-Indigenous educators to become learners is a prescriptive force that, without application, ensures the power relations that regulate teaching and learning according to the primacy of western epistemes remain *in situ*. It is a reminder of the primacy with which certain types of knowledge are validated and celebrated over others. Without advocating a separation or isolation of Indigenous knowledge, Nakata draws attention to the fact that knowledge about land, ecology, medicine, prophecy, religion, and so on, is often subject to distortion in the hands of western institutions.

A collaborative teaching praxis is one that develops according to a range of principles and applications. *PAR*'s participatory and collaborative model, although developed as a culturally specific model within a particular colonial experience and history, offers examples and insight as to how the process of critical awareness can be embedded into a praxis that inspires students towards self-transformation. Nakata, on the other hand, provides local, culturally specific approaches to rigorous pedagogy that demand reflexivity and critical awareness of non-Indigenous subjects within Australian academia: "it is in the structure of institutional practice", he asserts, "that change and transformation is sought." (Nakata, 2007, p.198). Similar to Spivak's injunction that we unlearn privilege as a loss (Harasym, 1990, p.30) and in her later work that we "learn to learn from below"

(Landry & MacLean, 1996, p.276), Nakata's work focuses on what must be done in order to effect pedagogical change that will benefit Indigenous scholars in terms of educational achievement, but also, will hopefully teach non-Indigenous people to consider value in knowledge outside of the domain of western science.

Embedding a Critical Praxis

Our teaching space is designed to reflect the circularity of knowledge systems and defies a panoptical division whereby seating conforms to a linear arrangement. Tables and chairs are arranged in an oval formation, visually and aurally conducive to the ebb and flow of dialogue and interaction; each student can see the tutor, and one another, and although tutors can sit at the front of the room, without any vertical partitioning of space this is not necessary, and more often than not, subverted for the purpose of stressing that it is a learning space for all, and that the space itself represents knowledge that may not easily conform to western linear constructions of time and space. In this location, teachers become learners and vice versa. Here, we can consider the roles students play in the formation of a critical pedagogy and the importance of space and location where educators can step outside of the safety of "those places and spaces we inherit and occupy, which frame our lives in very specific and concrete ways" (Borsa, cited in Robbins, 2006, p.286). There is no guarantee that corporeal symmetry in the teaching and learning space defuses all power structures. However, it symbolises *spatially* the possibility for all voices to be heard, listened to, and for all viewpoints to be considered and respected in an environment where the teaching of anti-racism and anti-colonialism and the acknowledgement and respect for cultural differences are central to our efforts.

Students are actively encouraged to relate subject matter to their own experiences. In one tutorial, for example, a student from Japan gave an exemplary presentation, teaching the group about the Ainu Indigenous people of Japan, their histories and practices, drawing comparisons in policy and attitude with what she had learned about Indigenous people in Australia. Her presentation imparted knowledge previously unknown to the twenty or more group participants. In another class, an Aboriginal student taught us about his particular country, and the associated struggle for land rights, land management, and the expression of local cultural ritual that were central to his lived experience, his approach to learning in a western institution, and his discomfiture with western arrogance when pitted against the integrity of local cultural knowledge within his community.

Again, we learned much from this student, as has been the case with many similar examples. In both cases cited, the introduction of new knowledges stimulated interest and debate.

In articulating personal histories and cultural differences, the students themselves set the pace for a dialogue that commences from the standpoint of their knowledge, research, or authority on a particular topic. If codes of respect are identified early in collaboration with the students, the conditions for one or two voices to dominate are removed. As we can *see* one another being taught to think critically, question, understand, and accept, our pedagogy takes the form of a visual and aural entity that values relevant personal narratives, and seeks to give students an understanding of their place in the world, their subject position, and the possibilities for becoming actively engaged in social and political transformation. The teaching and learning space thus undermines the authorial voice of one individual and provides the capability to make sense of the dominant discourses of racism to which we are all subjected. This is a pedagogical space that doesn't seek to "clear up confusion" or "establish calculated distributions" (Foucault, 1977, p.219). Instead, it seeks to put into disarray the disciplinary forces that regulate student/teacher power relations and inform subjectivities by instating a democratising pedagogy that is underscored by a sensory awareness of spatial and temporal orientation.

Within the discipline of Aboriginal Studies, subject content and pedagogical practices assume a highly politicised focus: our starting point is a belief that education can provide a sound basis for social transformation. This all sounds fine, and few would disagree, but what does this really mean in the context of teaching and learning marginalised histories and cultures? How do educators resolve the tension between our responsibility towards striving for a critical pedagogy with the omnipresent demands of corporatism that deliver the 'ticks in boxes' required for individual and professional self-advancement?

Much of what we teach is revisionist history based on the writings, oral teachings and contested knowledge of Indigenous scholars, both western and non-western. Critical theories delivered through lectures and course readings privilege a range of Indigenous sources, both written and oral. Aboriginal Studies as it is developing in our workplace provides students with a discursive platform where a sustained anti-colonial critique can be proffered, debated, challenged, or supplemented, and where oppositional canons can be instated, evaluated, understood, and also, challenged. We encourage inquiry and dialogue where students can feel safe to disagree, but where we can guide them to think critically rather than penalise them for voicing their opposition in what

can be inappropriate or racist ways. We are aware that many ideas put forward in our teaching are confronting to the orthodoxy of self-interest, national interest, and globalisation that many students have been taught to accept as 'truths' that are a 'natural' consequence of modernity. It is not uncommon to hear the view that colonialism has produced many benefits for Indigenous people, or that assimilation is a necessary component of national unity. We often pre-empt such commonly held views by initiating formal tutorial debates that require students to prepare and consider the pros and cons of colonisation, putting forward both sides of the argument in question. This practice 'lays on the table' commonly held, and racist viewpoints in a group situation without ascribing the view, or the accusation of racism to a particular student; we understand that none of us are removed from the discourses that circulate and reproduce racism. Providing a platform where all viewpoints can be articulated, we find, not only ensures safety in expressing views, it also offers the opportunity to reconsider the discursive construction of racist myths. Once aired, these viewpoints can be discussed in light of set readings, lecture material and theoretical understandings of race relations. The iteration of personal narratives that often accompanies reflection about certain viewpoints engages students subjectively, and provides opportunities for critical re-evaluation of assumed 'knowledge'.

Where possible, our pedagogy is supplemented by the inclusion of Indigenous community members who provide often, experiential knowledge of policy and practice. For example, a lecture embedded into one course gives a detailed account of the lecturer's experience of the Stolen Generations and the official practice of child removal and the subsequent, resulting consequences of dislocation and loss. Documentary evidence of child removal is given, as are testimonials to the devastating and on-going psychological effects of assimilation policies. This lecture negates the limitations of any formal history lesson I could provide; indeed in a discipline where rigorous pedagogy is geared towards both a theoretical and experiential approach, the inclusion of such narratives by Indigenous subjects is crucial. Indigenous voices bring to the students the lived realities of colonialism by imparting a real experience from which to think more critically about national histories, and the on-going and devastating effects of colonial policies. We find it useful to balance the often-sad content of Aboriginal Studies by drawing attention to the burgeoning cultural production of Indigenous people in areas of art, literature, film and theatre. Mindful of Nakata's claim that "[H]ow we see things critically depends on our own historical location" (140), we deploy a wide range of teaching aids and actively seek and utilise texts that reinforce the en-

duringness of Aboriginal cultures. It is not uncommon to hear students from the United States express that their brief period of study with us has rejuvenated interest in their own national histories, and in the histories of Native American people. Similarly, non-Indigenous domestic students often learn for the first time the history of Australian Indigenous people, and many express exasperation at not having had the opportunity to learn this material in their formative years of study.

In this politicised arena, existing canons of knowledge are contested terrains and occupy the field critiqued by Barbara Foley as “canon-busting activity” (Foley, 2001, pp.95-211). Foley expresses anxiety about what she calls the “canon-busting” movement and the tendency towards the valorisation of anything that opposes existing western canons of knowledge. No doubt scepticism about large scale “canon busting” is warranted, inasmuch as the reflection and re-evaluation of any pedagogy is good practice. However, “canon busting activity” is not merely a set of practices that seek to flip the binary of western/other. Nor is it the *only* endeavour of a pedagogy whose focus is anti-racism or necessarily the product of scepticism and disenchantment. Indeed, as Giroux (2006) notes, critical pedagogy forges critique and agency through a language of scepticism and possibility. “Canon-busting” in the context of Indigenous Studies, and the promotion of Indigenous knowledge promotes an awareness of the politics of knowledge production and categorisation, and of the discourses that organise and hierarchise knowledge production and consumption. As Aronowitz (2000) argues, “[T]he task of pedagogy is to encourage the surplus - the elements of the canon that transcend the sacred texts by putting them in their historical context and into the debates that formed them” (p.170).

Academic staff are aware of the demands of market forces that decree knowledge as commodifiable, and we engage with the discourse of “vocationalism” that permeates Higher Education. We are also conversant with the constraints that the economy driven forces of higher education place on us, and how these can threaten to silence, marginalise, or worse, demonise, if we don’t find effective ways of combining a critical pedagogy that endorses the collaborative efforts of all participants in the pedagogical process with the omnipresent neo-liberal sanctioning of individualism. As a teaching team, our strength lies in our multi-disciplinarity; we draw from expertise in health, visual art, drama, film, literature, ecology, geography, education and cultural studies, bringing together a range of disciplinary standpoints and methodological possibilities that provides us with a practical and theoretical basis for courses that can speak to an equally diverse student body. This di-

verse range of perspectives dilutes the tendency towards competitiveness that is often fostered within academia; we are constantly taught by one another across this disciplinary spectrum of knowledges.

With a nod to the demands of corporate regulation and vocational aspiration, we invite unlearning, re-learning, and listening to the voices of the student cohort, from their diverse and multiple contexts. From this standpoint, we are able to derive some understanding of the world from which students speak. To say this implies that as educators, we occupy a different world. In many ways we do. We are afforded the privilege of critique in an environment where this is both fostered and validated, albeit with some constraints. Many students are not so fortunate, and relate the repercussions of critical thought as they play out in their social and familial settings, often with damaging consequences. It is common for students in areas of study that focus on anti-racism to reiterate the negative responses of friends and family members who view their newfound enthusiasm for the politics of cultural difference and anti-racism with derision at best, and at worst, disdain, often accompanied by accusations of treachery, secreted in the rhetoric of mockery. Comments such as “my family roll their eyes when I talk about Aboriginal issues” are not uncommon from non-Indigenous students, and as educators, we are mindful of the dangers of reactionary or un-theorised approaches to our responses. On occasions, we hear similar narratives from Indigenous students, many of whom are also imbued with the assimilationist discourse Aboriginal Studies contests. Our task, then, is often fraught with knowledge of the multi-faceted layerings of personal and official histories, and depends on mutual support, collaboration and communal effort in order to be effective.

Conclusion

In considering the diversity of staff, both in cultural and disciplinary terms, the diverse student body, and the politics of individualism that regulates much of what we do, this paper has sought to reconfigure the teaching award by bringing together theoretical application, practice, collaboration and collective energies, as I have experienced these in the development of a critical pedagogy. I have also sought to bring into focus what I see as an unresolvable tension between individualism and collaboration that informs and regulates an emerging praxis. It is clear, though, that students, Indigenous community participants, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics, all play a crucial role in providing an effective teaching praxis in Aboriginal Studies. It is clear also, that sustaining critical pedagogy in the face of ever-competing and corporate demands is not an inconsid-

erable task, and that the contestation of knowledges that underscore much anti-racist pedagogy are a

challenge also to the forces that produce us as subjects in higher education.

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