11. Why and how: Critical thinking matters when teaching diverse student groups

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ABSTRACT

Social work educators are teaching in an era of Western neoliberalism with an increasingly culturally diverse student group. This paper is the result of deliberations about teaching Australian students who may enter university with individualised perspectives and how these students are often challenged by community based principles held by students from other cultures. Some students also come from cultures which promote the role of students as passive recipients of education. Neoliberal individuality joined with passive approaches to education can lead to practitioners who do not stand with diverse groups in the community to challenge systems which represent the antithesis of social justice. Following the traditions of Habermas, this paper explores how the principles of Relational Empowerment (VanderPlaat, 1998) can be introduced in tutorials to establish a communicative space where educators and students explore concepts of critical thinking and embrace knowledge creation as a shared pursuit which addresses imbalances of power.

Keywords: *diversity, critical thinking, empowerment, communicative space, neoliberalism*

INTRODUCTION

As an experienced social work practitioner who has moved into social work and welfare education, I have found that the neoliberal, individualised perspectives of many Australian students' contrasts with values based in community that many overseas students bring. This has provided many challenges. In tutorial groups I often find one or other group to be silenced to some degree. This constrains all participants' ability to embrace critical thinking about differing perspectives and to enjoy healthy debate during tutorial time. Students from some cultural backgrounds also understand that absorbing knowledge is paramount to education, and would not question the value context of the host nation. Thus I find that it is more often overseas students who are silenced. This is of particular relevance to potential social work and welfare education graduates who may find themselves called upon to challenge unfair systems and a lack of social justice values in the community at large. If our graduates have not learned to think critically and debate alternative positions they will not be best placed to progress social work ideals and serve their client groups by redressing injustices which are embedded in unequal power relations (Tilbury, Osmond and Scott 2009).

This paper considers how critical sociological theory and empowerment methodologies can be brought into tutorial groups to promote critical thinking of social work and welfare students. I first briefly discuss the contemporary neoliberal context of social work and welfare education, and introduce some of the critical theoretical perspectives of Habermas, Foucault, and Bourdieu. Feminist critiques are then considered and a relational empowerment approach to constructing tutorials as a communicative space is outlined. How relational empowerment principles and a relational empowerment framework can be utilised to encourage critical thinking with diverse groups is discussed. To conclude, the aspirations for employing this framework are discussed and suggestions for furthering this approach are put forward.

THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT OF NEOLIBERALISM

In neo-liberalist times within westernised societies individualism has become the norm, as competition rather than cooperation is lauded as admirable. As Raewyn Connell notes, within this arena, 'concepts of common interest and democratic deliberation decline' (2011 p.2). This is the state of play for students, particularly some of our younger students, who may not have been exposed to alternative systems and perspectives from other cultures. Further, we welcome them into university as paying guests whose job is to absorb skills for the workplace while gaining marks which are awarded in competition with each other. In universities we simultaneously welcome students from overseas who may come with expectations of community principles and concerns. Some also bring understandings that they will be receiving and absorbing knowledge. Against this background, teaching from an ethos of encouraging critical thinking can be challenging.

DEFINING CRITICAL THINKING

In this paper critical thinking refers to questioning and considering received information

from both a subjective and an objective viewpoint. Subjective knowledge includes values, perspectives and traditions that have been acquired through life experience and as such are influenced by diverse cultures and traditions. Such views are often internalised and act as a filter for whether received knowledge is acquired or rejected. Procedural knowledge is the term used when received knowledge which is congruent with subjective knowledge is incorporated (Jordan, Kaplan, Baker Miller, Stiver and Surrey 1991).

This view of constructing procedural knowledge contrasts with present neoliberal discourses, where objective knowledge based in evidence accrued from scientific research is prized. Against this backdrop, Wade and Travis (2008 p. 7) claim that critical thinking is:

The ability to assess claims and make objective judgements on the basis of well supported reasons and evidence rather than emotions and anecdote.

It is suggested here that this definition excludes valuable critical perspectives from ideas and information informed by subjective experiences and values acquired in diverse cultures. It is important for critical thinking to be able to embrace alternative views and to develop knowledge through open debate. Critical thinking embraces more than 'scientific fact' when it allows different world views to emerge and be considered. Even when we speak of 'evidence' the case is not clear cut. In social work academic research, 'evidence based practice' is hotly debated and critical thinking about alternative research findings offer different perspectives (Tilbury et al. 2009). This brings me to consider what critical theory can bring to critical thinking in the tutorial classroom. Here I turn to Habermas to see how a wider construct can be embraced as the foundation for critical thinking that encourages the espousing of a multiplicity of views based in students' diverse subjective experiences of cultures, community, family, religious observations and educational practices.

SOCIOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS

Critical theory is situated within a structural framing of society where social structures are seen to hold dominance over human behaviour (Crotty, 1998). According to critical theory, the privileging of science and expert views silence people who are then persuaded that science defines the problems, provides answers and offers solutions (Habermas 1979). In westernised cultures, experiences are reframed by experts in terminology that is then used to mysticise those without power. This channels the requirement for social change into work for professionals and agencies (Fraser 1989). If an expert perspective is embraced by students of social and welfare work, knowledge is seen to depend exclusively on scientific 'fact' and ordinary people's perceptions, feelings and the context in which their views are formed, are excluded (Sprague 2005). In the application of expert opinion these deep, rich, complex and varied perceptions are missed and it becomes easy to objectify, categorise and pathologise (Lapierre 2010). If students of social and welfare work then take an uncritical view, they will expound received knowledge as expertise without considering their own subjective knowledge or valuing the subjective knowledge of others. An example of where this can happen is apparent in my own research area of attachment theory. When learning about attachment theory, if social work and welfare students apply a critical lens they can recognise when practices accommodate individualist perspectives without considering

societal pressures on mother/infant dyads (Buchanan 2008). If an uncritical view is taken the danger is that, as future practitioners, they may enter their professional career and follow neo-liberal conventions with regard to this area of practice and others. Within such practices it has been noted that: 'The person is transcribed into a needy but deserving client …such clients have few choices but to comply, assertiveness goes, passivity is expected' (Offe 1984 p. 156).

TUTORIALS AS COMMUNICATIVE SPACES

Although Habermas did not address issues of multicultural groups in particular, his view that awareness in ordinary people may be muted by institutionalised expert opinions has relevance when we look to teach such groups within educational institutions. Habermas proposes that communicative spaces where people can meet and debate, lead to critical discussion on assumptions that have gained acceptance as 'the truth' (Habermas 1979, 1986; Rundell, Petherbridge, Bryant, Hewitt and Smith 2004). Habermas contests the dominance of existentialist perceptions which, in his view, promote an image of people without agency (McCarthy 1978). Building on the collection of works by Marx and Engels, Habermas proposes an ideal of communication based in the 'life world' where everyone's voice is held in equal value. Further, to deepen this perspective the concept of 'symbolic violence,' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 p. 172) where students may have embedded attitudes of dominance and control hierarchies in the social world, can be kept in mind by the educator. The philosophies of Bourdieu regarding this issue can also be offered to students for debate. However it is to Habermas that I turn to consider how tutorial space could promote such discussions.

In Habermas's view, communicative action is epitomised by logical debate between equals who accept and reject arguments to reach collective consensus. This theory relies on a rational ethic of justice that promotes freedom and equality, with communicative spaces governed by accepted rules and the recognition of equal rights to speak (Habermas 1979, 2004). However, Habermas's perspective has been challenged by Foucault for its naivety in believing that one standard can be reached, which then creates the standard which other perspectives can be measured against (Flyvbjerg 1998). Foucault postulates instead that freedom to express and accept different views is the real measure of legitimate democratic processes (Foucault 1984). Within this debate, unequal power relations can be recognised and named. This is of particular relevance to students of social and welfare work who are encouraged to embrace awareness of social justice issues which disenfranchise some people in society. With regard to differing cultural perspectives in tutorials, students can be encouraged to embrace difference and perceive power differentials through debate informed by diverse subjective experiences.

If particular principles of empowerment are applied, the hope is that students will question their own subjective perspective, while gaining understanding and tolerance of alternative world views from which to form procedural knowledge. Procedural knowledge refers to understanding when knowledge received from others is incorporated with subjective knowledge to create new knowledge that enables new perspectives to evolve (Jordan, et al. 1991). This knowledge creation process has relevance for Australian and international

students from varied backgrounds because it enables the development of understandings of cultural differences.

Habermas's theory regarding communicative space is criticised by feminists as privileging the confident and articulate (Chambers 1995; Bickford 1996). His theory is described as too narrow in defining communication because it excludes emotional dimensions of lived experience (Pajnik 2006). In line with Foucault's position regarding power imbalances, from a feminist perspective communication needs to be based in a concept of care that counters the privileging of some, by incorporating encouragement of others, so that those who lack confidence and polished oratory skills are heard (Chambers 1995; Bickford 1996). Within this space diverse perspectives are encouraged by active listening, acceptance of difference and respect for the emotional content of others' lived experiences (Pajnik 2006). By incorporating the concept of communicative space based in caring into tutorials, we encourage mutual support and validation. Thus knowledge of diversity is accessed and appreciation of difference is encouraged. To follow Foucault (1984), there may be no consensus of opinion but open dialogue allows expression and understanding of different views.

The purpose of this paper is to consider how to encourage critical thinking through open debate amongst students from diverse backgrounds. This is an approach to education that embraces communicative spaces based in the practices of caring. Within these parameters, differing perspectives formed through diverse cultural experiences are sought. In light of the critical theoretical perspectives outlined above, an approach to teaching based in principles of relational empowerment which supports these premises is proposed.

APPROACH AND PRINCIPLES OF RELATIONAL EMPOWERMENT

A relational empowerment approach assumes that empowerment has a relational component which enables empowerment-oriented community practice (Cristens 2012). The principles of relational empowerment were developed by feminist psychologists (Jordan et al. 1991a) and applied with individuals in therapy as well as in feminist evaluation research (VanderPlaat 1998). It is posited here that these principles are equally applicable to teaching diverse student groups because they aim to encourage open dialogue while acknowledging difference in a supportive environment. As a framework for teaching, relational empowerment looks to the creation of a communicative space, based in respect, to support students' ability to work together thereby gaining clarity about their own feelings and thinking (Surrey 1991). The following principles which underlie a relational empowerment approach are adapted from Surrey (1991) and VanderPlaat (1998) and discussed in relation to teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Everyone can contribute to the making of knowledge

A foundational premise of a relational empowerment approach is that the experiences of students from differing cultures, socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds all hold knowledge about interactions and understandings. These understandings are drawn upon to question the assumptions students make about learning. Unpacking these assumptions promotes student awareness of how knowledge and opinions are formed. This perspective

acknowledges that knowledge is fluid and can incorporate diverse students' subjective knowledge which comes from a myriad of diverse experiences. For example, concerns re contrasting views about responsibility for children can be explored through reflection on the circumstances of students' own cultural experiences. While there is a need to include caveats concerning personal experiences of abuse for students' self-protection, individualised responsibility expected of parents in Australia can be contrasted with community responsibility for children in different cultures. Increased understanding of other cultural practices deepens reflection on the merits of diverse systems. Discussion about cultural differences regarding expectations of parenting roles and the use of corporal punishment are inherent in such discussions. Opportunities to include perspectives of children's rights arise through these debates.

Knowledge acquisition needs to be based in emotional authenticity

Furthermore, emotion can be perceived as an important component of students' cultural experiences. Acknowledging emotions helps define their experiences in relation to self and others (Maynard and Purvis 1994; Hesse-Biber 2007). As Jagger (1996) points out, emotions are interpretations of sensations and feelings, past and present, informed by relationships in the past and present. In naming emotions as important, students' feelings are taken seriously rather than ignored, trivialised, dismissed or discounted (Wylie 2007). For example, in class discussions, when a dominant idea which may cause discomfort to cultural norms is raised, a question may be posed: 'how do you feel when you hear that statement?' This allows room for discussion about the subjective experience that informs the foundation underlying the feeling. Following Bourdieu (1992), debate could include consideration of the societal concepts of domination and control that are held in the psyche. When issues such as termination of pregnancy are debated in class, uncomfortable feelings are raised and acknowledged. While students are not expected to change long-held views they can become aware of the rationales for outlooks which differ from their own. The strong feelings that are evoked are similar to those that are held in the broader community and debating these can help students to consider how they will respond to future colleagues and clients who hold strong views that may conflict with their own. In this way students are empowered as debating challenging subjects equips them with confidence to deal with situations which may eventuate in their future careers.

Emotional authenticity can be voiced through a communication of care

Relational empowerment can be utilised as a framework that supports engagement with students so that their feelings, experiences and ideas are acknowledged (Surrey 1991). Through an ethos of mutual care built into tutorials, students can discuss the emotions that inform their culturally embedded perspectives. By ensuring that the relevance of this is visible, a philosophy that brings emotions and relationships into the process of teaching and learning is encouraged. The purpose of this teaching strategy is to nurture respectful relationships with and between students. The shared acknowledgment of experiences can help students to define their experiences, compare and contrast these with the experiences of other students. This approach defines a space in tutorials where there is support for; 'open ended-ness, dialogue, explicitness, and reciprocity' (Apple 1991, p. x). A call for different perspectives and opinions can encourage open discussion and appreciation of cultural diversity. Questions such as 'are different views held in your country of origin?' and

'Is that a particularly "Australian" view point, do you think?' can help to bring different perspectives into debates.

Achieving empowerment is defined as developing skills and resources to inform and make contributions to society

Empowerment is defined as: 'a process that challenges our assumptions about the way things are and can be' (Page and Czuba 1999, p. 1). In having their knowledge respected, students further develop the skills to speak with conviction that their experiences hold knowledge that is of use to others. Relational empowerment honours students' diverse experiences, so that the ability to speak and have their knowledge respected leads to increased valuing of their own perceptions. Through the educator recognising that students hold differing perspectives imbued with emotions, students see that in speaking with emotional authenticity, their voices can contribute to helping other students understand cultural differences. When students speak up, the educator may take opportunities to acknowledge their contribution to the tutorial and to comment on the need to appreciate the authenticity of diverse cultural understandings. For instance, in my experience, some strong negative attitudes towards working with gay and lesbian clients have come to light when students' written assignments are submitted for marking. This has occurred without previous debate in class which would have offered opportunity to develop understanding of the underlying questions of human rights and practice ethics. A comment on a marking sheet is not conducive to addressing this issue in depth or to exploring the experiences and influences which inform such values. If a communicative space based in respect can allow open debate in class then an understanding that there are different beliefs based in different experiences could open the door for wider learning. In accord with Foucault, I do not expect consensus to be reached but all students present learn that there are diverse views and consider their own subjective views in relation to others. As such an opportunity to embrace concepts of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1992) inherent for all members of communities, cultures and gendered groups is presented.

Empowerment emerges rather than being given or taken

As Surrey (1991) states 'Each feels empowered through creating and sustaining a context that leads to increased awareness and understanding' (p. 167). Knowledge sharing is a communicative process where empowerment emerges as students find connections with each other. It is the role of the educator to construct a framework that 'provides the structure for the creative empowerment process' (Surrey 1991, p. 176). Within this view it is the responsibility of the educator to ensure that the tutorial norms support an ambiance which encourages empowerment, so students feel comfortable in expressing cultural differences. Critical thinking can emerge as students from diverse cultural backgrounds are valued for their insights and their contribution to the joint learning process. The setting of tutorial norms which are based in respect of difference calls for students to respectfully listen to each other, to connect and to consider others' perspectives (Belensky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule 1997). Within the norms, tutorial groups which consist of a diverse range of students schooled in ethics and values of social and welfare work can enable rich debate to inform, deepen and broaden perspectives through attending to input from others. As Bourdieu (2004 p. 23) states; 'rigorous analysis of situations and institutions is undoubtedly the best antidote against partial views'.

In tutorials, societal and cultural norms may influence students from diverse cultural backgrounds to preference the 'received' knowledge of experts at the expense of their own subjective knowledge. However, a relational empowerment approach privileges voices based in diverse experiences and encourages subjective knowledge to be voiced. When the 'received knowledge' from other voices is congruent with their own subjective knowledge, each student is able to feel validated and empowered. Alternatively, when the subjective knowledge of other students seems incongruent, students are encouraged to think critically about their own and other perspectives. This approach is embedded in adult learning principles as consideration is given to the wealth of experience that all students bring to the tutorial group, and also to confidentiality and respect as there is a focus on creating safety in the learning environment. (Enterprise Applications Documentation and Training Services 2012)

In this way, it is envisaged that procedural knowledge is accrued which enables students to put forward perspectives that lead to new viewpoints being created. A sense of awareness and understanding of self and others as availed in a context constructed and sustained in respectful relationships (Jordan et al. 1991). In this process, subjective knowledge and received knowledge from education is enhanced by the subjective and received knowledge of other students from diverse cultures.

Knowledge sharing as a multifaceted process

In designing tutorials from a relational empowerment perspective to enable students to access subjective and procedural knowledge, it is vital that the knowledge they receive about processes from the educator is respectful, clear and unambiguous. The educator would share information about the aims and processes of the approach, which includes consulting with students and 'feeding back' to students from observations. A concrete evaluation process about the application of these relational empowerment principles allows the processes to be adjusted, fine-tuned and adapted.

A relational empowerment approach is evolved in the spaces between all participants in the tutorial, between individual students from diverse backgrounds and the educator, as well as in the spaces between students as they discuss and work together. The educator is situated between experiences, linking one source with another and identifying patterns and differences which emerge. This includes the context, psychosocial constructs and the discourses which underpin diverse understandings. As such, the educator includes his/her experiences of learning from the 'life world', books, study and professional practice, so that the educator's procedural knowledge and received knowledge from others is also critically examined and contributes to the diversity of knowledge brought to the class.

Through encouraging open relationships between students the intention is to stimulate both the learning environment and enable students from diverse backgrounds to feel empowered through the tutorial process. Sensitivity to the needs of students requires that the educator enables the students who actively participate to feel empowered, while also reaching for opinions from more reticent students from a 'nonintrusive and non-impositional stance' (VanderPlaat 1999, p. 3). This may necessitate using small group work in class and working with each small group to encourage reticent participants to voice their opinions in the small group before asking for their opinion to be shared in the larger group.

Everyone involved changes through a process of empowerment
To follow VanderPlaat:

At the very heart of the concept of relational empowerment is the principle that one can never be just an empowerer or a person in need of empowerment. (1999, p.777)

Everyone involved and participating in respectful communicative space is changed through the process of empowerment. Students achieve clarity and empowerment through having their thoughts and feelings validated while the educator stays open and flexible to his/her own developing insight and clarity (VanderPlaat 1999). All participants bring knowledge to the classroom and this includes the educator's knowledge. However, during tutorials, the educator's perspective is only of use in relation to others. The educator is present both as an agent and as a subject. The educator's power is to act as an agent employing subjective, received and procedural knowledge, to design the tutorial, to guide discussion and to interpret the insights offered by students. Within the parameters of relational empowerment, the educator also contributes by respectfully presenting the topic material and encouraging open discussion. Simultaneously, as subject, the educator is a 'front-line' recipient of students' subjective knowledge from their various cultural perspectives. The educator receives knowledge from students and combines it with subjective and received understandings to encourage critical thinking in the tutorial. The educator needs to be open to new knowledge while contributing from their own. From a white Australian perspective there are many insights from other cultures which contribute to challenging assumptions and expanding learning. For example my own feminist beliefs about the status of women as homemakers has been challenged by some African students' insistence that it is women who hold power in the community because they have responsibility for the home. Social work knowledge and skills are used by educators to respectfully engage with students and to utilise their perceptions in the pursuit of learning but within this process the educator also needs to be open to new learnings.

Mutual support within groups and between individuals is important
When the educator creates expectations that students' subjective knowledge will interrelate, this enables students to share cultural experiences and to authenticate their own subjective knowledge. By sharing their experiences with others, students gain insight about how their world differs from others. However, the sharing of experiences is dependent on a foundation of principles which promote trusting relationships. Within relational empowerment principles, trust generates a space where students increase their personal power, including their power to speak with confidence that their subjective knowledge will be valued (VanderPlaat 1999). It is the educator's responsibility to inspire trust by being true to the principles of relational empowerment, through valuing and respecting the contributions of all students.

In addition, support and trust between students is important. According to Jagger (1996), experience connects to subjective knowledge that has been developed by the self in relationships and includes emotional reactions that help to form meaning. Subjective experience is validated by others reciprocally listening and understanding. Therefore, the sharing of experience creates a relationship which touches the emotions and can validate

subjective knowledge by promoting a mutual support between tutorial participants. It is the sharing of such interactions and the growth of self in connection with others that brings diverse lived experiences into philosophical and political debate (Ahmed 2004). Furthermore, when injustices towards others resonate with injustices done to self, students learn to trust their own subjective knowledge and can speak of what was hidden (Ahmed 2004). Mutual support, in a space where students affirm each other as they explore similarities and differences, enables empowerment to be created in the spaces between (Belensky et al. 1997).

CONCLUSION

Surrey describes the prerequisite to relational empowerment as 'acting to create, sustain and deepen the connections that empower' (1991, p. 164). In this relational space, critical thinking evolves in an ethos of support where the outcome is increased understanding and broader awareness. This approach involves a commitment to support, to advance critical thinking and to enable empowerment. This can be achieved by inviting students to appreciate and reflect on the perspectives of their peers and encouraging explicit details of the origins of differing perspectives to be shared.

This paper offers a framework based in theoretical concepts of critical theory and relational empowerment, which can be used in tutorial groups to promote empowerment and engage students in practicing critical thinking about their subjective knowledge and experiences. By introducing relational empowerment principles as a structure for tutorial work with diverse student groups, teaching strategies can be developed to make these principles explicit, which involves devoting time to establish the principles in class. The process is adjunct to the subject content being taught and is offered as a guide to the process of running tutorials rather than a subject to be taught. The ideas encompassed in this paper have not been tested or evaluated and the next step is to formalise a research study in the classroom, so that the application of relational empowerment with student groups from diverse backgrounds can be evaluated.

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