Meeting the Challenge of Higher Education: Creating Transformational Spaces that Empower Learners

Heather Jeannie Herbert
Charles Sturt University, Australia

Abstract

This paper will discuss research findings that highlight the importance of contemporary higher education providing opportunities for opening up communicative spaces that encourage learners – researchers, teachers and students – to engage in ways that enable education to become a critical tool for empowerment within both individual and group contexts. A particular focus of this paper will be the creation of cross-cultural learning environments that enable all participants to engage in critical learning journeys that create and build upon their mutual understanding and respect for one another - their respective knowledges, languages, cultures and life experiences. Finally this paper will consider how learners, actively undertaking such learning journeys, develop the capacity to not only transform their own lives and those of their families and communities, but also acquire the knowledge and understanding needed to contribute to a wider societal transformation.
Introduction
This paper is premised upon the reality of education delivery in a modern world. A world in which we, as educators, must look beyond the learning needs of past students to ensure that our current policies, programs and practices have the capacity to deliver an education that prepares present and future students for meaningful engagement in the productive life of his or her society. But increasingly this is a world in which the old established thinking that determined the boundaries or borders around the social, cultural, economic and political processes that operated within and beyond various national states is evolving, possibly even threatened, by a world that is, quite literally, beyond our experience. The theme for this conference, “Learning and Teaching Through Transformative Spaces” alerts us to the real challenge of the future for us as educators – the need to transform ourselves in order to meaningfully engage with our students and their learning needs.

This paper will consider how effectively the creation of transformational spaces might enhance the capacity of Higher Education to meet challenges associated with addressing cultural diversity in ways that enable students from different cultural backgrounds to empower themselves through their university experience. Using the term ‘empower’ is a deliberate ploy here for if we return briefly to the world that many of us know, boundaries or borders have, over time, been used for various purposes including the creation of divisions that could then be used to include some while simultaneously excluding others. Much has been written about how colonialists used borders to take control of the land and resources of others, to subjugate and destroy the culture of the previous inhabitants and to impose their cultural and economic supremacy in order to dominate those they had invaded (Fong Chua & Poullaos: 2002). But could this be changing in a global world, where new technologies have led to an explosion not only of knowledge but, equally important, its accessibility. Modern media contributes to this accessibility by ensuring we are all aware of the massive changes that could be perceived as breaking down the old World order while simultaneously destroying those borders of exclusion. Amidst the constant noise created by 24 hour news cycles bombarding us with highly dramatic descriptions of catastrophic events, it can be difficult to maintain our focus on the purpose of our work as educators. Yet, it is vital that we acknowledge the chaotic state of our current world for such action highlights the relevance of our work in delivering education that does prepare people to participate effectively in the world in which they live, thus empowering themselves through their education. We must also acknowledge that it is easy to talk about people from culturally diverse backgrounds ‘empowering’ themselves through higher education. Such words project a dual image of universities opening their door to those who missed out on a university education and of those who missed out, suddenly deciding the time had come for them to go get a university education and build a better life for themselves. Based upon my own life and work experience, I would argue that the reality is somewhat different. Hence, this paper will consider the following questions:

1. Is it important for modern universities to create transformational spaces for addressing cultural diversity?
2. How do people whose families have suffered serious inter-generational education disadvantage, empower themselves through tertiary education?
3. What needs to happen in communicative spaces to enable Indigenous students and/or other colonized groups to engage in transformative learning?
Context for Discussion
The challenges inherent in these questions will be considered within the context of higher education delivery for Indigenous students in contemporary Australia.

Universities in Australia
Any consideration of the modern university in Australia must acknowledge Australia’s long colonial history and the reality that, as a British colony, early Australian universities reflected the traditions of the colonizer, hence, were established to ensure upward social mobility to the elite in society. Following the election of the Whitlam Labor Government of the early 1970s, the focus shifted to social justice and the subsequent abolishment of university tuition fees, forced universities to open their doors to students from a diversity of educational backgrounds. Successive Federal Labor Governments, in the 1980s, despite their stated concern for equity, implemented more economically driven policies aimed at ensuring a more competitive Australian workforce (Herbert: 2012). Hence, there has been huge growth in student enrolment, especially of students from equity groups, in Australian universities; a shift to preparing students for employment in the professions; and a need to employ academic staff with professional experience. The need to produce graduates with specific professional competencies has tended to overshadow production of critical thinkers. Governments’ commitment to economic rationalism over recent decades has resulted in policy making and subsequent service provision being increasingly dominated by managerial demands around issues of accountability - standards, efficiency and productivity - driven by political masters preoccupied with shaping a world that reflects neoliberal beliefs while maintaining the colonial centre-periphery power structures that underpin capitalism. As a result many academics feel their role, relative to the purpose of universities, has been devalued, their capacity to deliver the relevant, quality education that is their ‘raison d’être’ is being eroded away and nobody is listening. The resulting discontent means Australian universities may not always be welcoming sites for the disadvantaged student seeking self-empowerment.

Indigenous Australian Student Cohort
Over recent decades, with the expansion of globalization, many who work in universities have experienced increasing student numbers together with increasing cultural diversity in the student body. Working in the field of Indigenous education in Australia, catering for cultural diversity has been the focus of my work over many decades and it is that work experience, as teacher, manager and researcher, that leads me to suggest that what happens in Australian Indigenous education could be seen as a microcosm of wider cross-cultural education environments.

Australian colonial texts, with their references to ‘the blacks’, ‘the savages’, ‘the Aborigines’, implied a oneness, a certain cohesion, but in reality Australia’s Indigenous peoples, Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Island peoples, comprised a diversity of groups occupying many distinct lands. There is a paucity of the written record in regard to Aboriginal populations at the time of invasion but various estimates suggest a total population around 750000 people, with 700 different languages (Australian Museum: 2013). While population recently reached 500000, few Aboriginal languages have survived.
It is important to acknowledge that, under contemporary Australian law, an Indigenous person is defined as a person of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives. Identification is determined by: descent; self-identification; and community acceptance. In this paper, the term Indigenous will be used to denote Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples and it is their educational experiences, as colonized peoples, that inform any discussion of the potential of education as a tool of self-empowerment. This is a critical aspect of this paper for Australia’s colonial legacy has ensured that education in Australia continues to be influenced by Western values and beliefs (Herbert, 2003: 25-26). Many universities have failed to recognise the ‘pervasive and unrelenting persistence of the invasion of Aboriginal Australia’ (Dudgeon cited in Herbert, 2003:75), a reality that has long diminished their capacity to deliver education that is empowering for Indigenous students.

Enabling Transformative Education
Finally, having provided a brief insight into the factors that have impacted upon Indigenous students participating in Australian universities, the evidence of recent research will be used to provide a way forward. In recognition of the students’ own agency in choosing to participate in the research, this paper will use student quotes to enable student voices to speak out, to share their experiences and insights concerning their engagement in the university. Analysis of those ‘voices’ will indicate what might constitute a ‘communicative space’ that enables Indigenous students and/or other colonized groups to engage in transformative learning.

Transformative education for culturally diverse learners
Transformative education essentially seeks to ‘transform’ how one views the world and one’s place within that world. In his Theory of Transformation Learning Mezirow argues that ‘learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience to guide future action’ (1996:162).

Nagata cites Lennox (2005) work around the on-going attempts to define transformation, highlighting her choice of O’Sullivan, Morrell, & O’Connor’s (2002) work to provide a tentative definition of integral transformative learning.

Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feeling, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race, and gender; our body-awarenesses; our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy (Lennox cited by Nagata, 2005:46).

This shift to thinking about who we are and how we become who we are enables learners to become more aware of issues of social justice and the importance of critically engaging in the discourses surrounding their own identity and their own positionality relative to those discourses (Kemmis: 2000). Such active engagement in their own learning, in the critical reflection and decision-making around who they are and where they wish to be is an essential element of transformative learning.
especially for culturally diverse students who may have limited experiences of engaging with and understanding the discourses that define their identity and how such identity may have been used to position them within their higher education learning environments (Lennox cited by Nagata: 2005).

**Communicative spaces**

This paper considers how the opening up of communicative spaces in universities might enable all learners – researchers, teachers and students – to engage more effectively in an education process that is empowering for all within both individual and collective contexts. This focus aligns with Habermas’s views around communicative action and its critical place “as the core concept” (cited by Kemmis, 2000:4) of philosophical modernity.

While such positioning is important, however, Wicks & Reason also stress the importance of what happens right at the beginning, in the discussions and actions that determine what is needed. They cited Kemmis (2001) argument that:

> The first step in action research turns out to be central: the formation of a communicative space which is embodied in networks of actual persons . . . A communicative space is constituted as issues or problems are opened up for discussion, and when participants experience their interaction as fostering the democratic expression of diverse views . . . [and as permitting] people to achieve mutual understanding and consensus about what to do . . . (Wicks & Reason, 2009:243).

**Relevance of transformative education practice in Australian universities**

The historical record demonstrates how education has been used to position Indigenous peoples within Australian society and, in the process, created a discourse of ‘failure’ that continues to permeate Indigenous education both in terms of student achievement and teacher expectations (Herbert, 2003:2012). It also reveals why Indigenous Australians are relative newcomers into the academe.

But, despite changes that began to occur in the 1960s, as a result of the international social and technological changes of the 1950s-1960s, the impact of 170 years of colonial oppression became increasingly evident in the levels of educational disadvantage suffered by Indigenous Australians. Despite the desire to improve the social and economic circumstances of Indigenous peoples and increase access to schools, especially primary schools, education continued to fail Indigenous Australians well into the 1980s. But this decade also marked a real change in the public profile of Indigenous Australians as ideals of self-determination began emerging. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP), endorsed and implemented in 1990, was a watershed in the history of Indigenous education in Australia, for it was: a) the first policy to deal specifically with education for Indigenous Australians; and, b) the first attempt to connect policy, schools and communities. It failed, however, to address the social environment in which Indigenous students lived and the reality that poor educational outcomes were deeply embedded in societal structures that continued to reflect colonial attitudes and the protection of Centre power (Herbert:2012).
The crucial breakthrough came in 2000 when governments began to recognise that the broader disadvantage suffered by many Indigenous peoples appeared to be affecting the capacity of governments, education providers and students themselves to improve Indigenous educational outcomes. They acknowledged that Indigenous education policy couldn’t be developed in isolation from other areas that would likely impact upon the social and economic wellbeing of Indigenous peoples and implemented structural changes to ensure Indigenous peoples’ engagement in what is termed a whole-of-government approach to policy development and implementation. This was a critical development as Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2011 census data revealed that Indigenous peoples comprised 2.5% of the total Australian population and Indigenous students comprised 1.4% of all university enrolment in 2010. Population parity remains a future goal and Indigenous Australians remain significantly under-represented within the Australian system of higher education. It has been difficult for such a small group, to make the diversity of their voices heard.

**Implications for Higher Education**

While change has been limited and slow, it is encouraging. More significantly, however, change is beginning to occur in higher education with reports of increased:

1. enrolments of school leavers with successful Year 12 completions; and
2. participation of Indigenous students in disciplines other than the arts, humanities, social science and teacher education.

The importance of such change was evidenced in 2012 when for the first time population parity was achieved for Indigenous students enrolling in the first year of medicine in universities across Australia. A small but significant achievement indicating that some Indigenous students are discovering that education can be a tool of empowerment. Upon reflection, these changes representing the emerging reality in Indigenous higher education in Australia, are particularly enlightening for they imply that something transformative may be beginning to take place in certain learning environments or within certain learners. And, there is evidence to support this argument in the small but growing number of qualified:

- Indigenous peoples taking up positions in the professions of law, medicine, engineering, science, accountancy and so on; and
- Indigenous academics, including at professorial level, being employed within Australia’s universities.

The following brief consideration of some of the findings from my PhD study into Indigenous success in higher education will be used to consider the potential of higher education to become a site for opening up communicative spaces that encourage learners – researchers, teachers and students – to engage in transformative education. Student voices drawn from my thesis will inform the discussion. Most of the students in this study perceived higher education as the pathway to realising their personal and professional aspirations, creating better futures for themselves and their families and achieving equality with their fellow citizens. Many students talked about their feelings of inadequacy within the university community, identifying lack of English language skills and/or very limited previous school experience as critical factors in their ‘not knowing what to do or how to do it’. Many had no knowledge of university protocols around expected behaviours, where or how to access whatever support they needed or how to deal with racist attitudes from staff and other students.
The research comprised a small qualitative study of 50 respondents participating in either individual interviews or focus group meetings, designed to explore Indigenous students’ lived experience in relation to their own education. Questions sought reflective responses from participants thus allowing some space for people to make their own choices about the knowledge they wished to share, an important consideration in a study that sought to demonstrate a commitment to processes of decolonization, of healing, of transitioning and transformation as individuals. Interview transcripts were returned to individuals so they could participate in a second interview if they desired to make changes to what they had said. This enabled them to participate in the decolonisation process and engage in their own transformation. Respondents were invited to share their opinions, thoughts and feelings about success and the experiences they considered had enabled them to become university students and/or academic staff. Data was gathered during 2001, in three universities, all of which had Indigenous support units. The following themes - power, knowledge, culture, community, diversity, language, policies and racism – emerged out of the data and were used as analytical tools to examine the university experience.

Research findings and implications

Major Finding

The majority of students in this study indicated they came to university to acquire the knowledge and skills they needed to get a better job, in terms of salary and security, thus enhancing their life opportunities. Over 50% of students considered their university studies were enabling them to become more critical thinkers and a similar number believed they were becoming better communicators. While these are vital aspirations for educational empowerment the fact that they can also be transformational is revealed in the following:

Margaret explained that she had come to university, thinking of herself simply as ‘Margaret’ but suddenly she became ‘black’, ‘female’ and ‘disadvantaged’. She was shocked by this and went and talked to the Professor in an effort to work out how to deal with these labels. She also experienced considerable conflict as a result of people in her classes — both lecturers and students — referring to Indigenous peoples in what she considered to be derogatory terms. After putting up with it as long as she could she was finally unable to remain silent.

The word ‘black’ was used really openly and I felt that some students didn’t want to be . . . to participate in your group. I mean it was not done in an ‘in your face way’ but you can read the body language . . . one day, in a group discussion, I got sick of them using the word ‘black’ so I stood up and said, ‘Excuse me, using the word ‘black’ like this upsets me. We’re future social workers, we’re going out to work with different people — Indigenous peoples and ethnic groups. I think that we should be thinking about how to get on with these people, how to relate to them. I think it’s time you left that word ‘black’ out of your vocabulary.’ Then the lecturer turned around to me and said, ‘So, what do we call them?’ I said, ‘Everybody has a name . . . use people’s names and why can’t we refer to Aboriginal people or Indigenous people?’

Ultimately, Margaret’s determination to bring such issues out into the public domain proved transformational for all engaged in that learning space for it forced people to
consider their attitudes not only within the context of fellow students but also beyond the university into their future workplace environments and the wider community. Significantly it also caused the lecturer to reflect upon the language she was using within the learning setting and the hidden messages she was conveying as a result. While she did modify her language, she also followed Margaret’s lead and established class discussions to critically reflect upon a range of sensitive issues that could have implications for these students in their future workplaces.

Other critical findings
Students in this study identified the following as the most critical factors in enabling them to achieve the outcomes they wanted from their higher education.

1. Access to Indigenous support units. All universities in this study, offered enabling and foundation programs in addition to general pastoral support for all Indigenous students studying in the university. Respondents indicated such units were the most positive form of enabling support universities could give their Indigenous students.

Len, who had attempted two mainstream programs prior to enrolling in the tertiary access program, provided some valuable insights.

When I first came to university, I went straight into a mainstream program. I thought I could handle that. My self-esteem was pretty low and I found it extremely hard to build my confidence. You put in assignments and just get over the line or go into exams and just get through or fail . . . It was just one big struggle all the time . . . coming into the access has made a big difference. I’m getting good marks because I’m getting encouragement and I’m talking with the lecturers because over here they have an interest in their students. In mainstream, no-one cares if you’re struggling, it’s like ‘so what if you drop out!’

A majority of students identified the importance of being able to return to the Centre between lectures, to be with their own people, to feel they belonged. Others talked of feeling proud to be able to bring their non-Indigenous fellow-students over to the Indigenous unit when they wanted to find a place to work together on some aspect of their course. Only two students in this study did not perceive the socialisation aspect of these units as critical to them being able to ‘hang in there . . . to survive’.

Essentially, these centres encouraged students to come in and actively engage in discussions with others - students and staff – as a means of enabling them to identify, explore and question what was happening to them and how they might deal with some of the issues they were confronting. Solving their own problems in this way was not only empowering for the individual but also enabled them to move on with minimal disruption to their studies.

2. Encouragement to take responsibility for their own learning. Research respondents revealed that, despite some initial reluctance, they grew to value opportunities where they could participate in formal and informal activities that focused on identifying factors that enabled them to effectively engage in their university learning. That such activities were an important component in building their personal capacity to persist in their studies, was revealed through the number of critical issues they identified including: relationships with teaching staff and other students; language – spoken,
written and body; access to tutors; cultural affirmation; racism, and, most importantly, being treated as equals.

Many students raised the inappropriate use of language, by teachers or fellow students, that made them feel culturally excluded and impacted upon their ability to engage. Such concerns did not apply only to spoken language as Margaret explained:

It didn’t matter what I did she would write comments all over it. I know I probably didn’t have good writing skills but she would write ‘you need to go and learn to talk proper English’ . . . that sort of thing.

Almost 80% of respondents suggested that the quality of relationships with teaching staff was a critical factor for Indigenous students and, in particular, the capacity of lecturers and tutors to provide support and demonstrate respect for students was considered to be paramount for students seeking success. Yvonne revealed that one of the things that made her feel valued in the university was ‘having people willing to listen, having the lecturers make time for me . . . I had a big fear about that. When they gave me their time it made me feel I was worth something’.

While students generally spoke positively about their learning interactions, some revealed how damaging negative experiences could be.

I remember in a first year lecture . . . I put my hand up and asked a question and the lecturer yelled at me that there was no such thing. The lecture theatre was full and she nearly killed me with that. About six weeks later, we had a lecture on the very thing I had asked about. That really killed me. I never had any input into her lectures after that, I wasn’t game to speak (Margaret).

I would be asked to explain some aspect of culture…but then they would give the impression that I was just talking a lot of rubbish (Lorraine).

These comments encapsulate the sense of powerlessness that too many students experienced, particularly during their initial engagement in mainstream studies. The use and misuse of power in educational encounters was a frequent focus of discussions involving students and staff in the centres. Ultimately, many of the students in this study attributed their capacity to confront and overcome such issues as having emerged out of their being able to engage in such discussions in a space where they were able to say whatever needed to be said.

Racism could be overt or covert, blatant or subtle:

. . . there were a couple of lecturers . . . no matter how hard I tried, it was never good enough. In my third year . . . I was doing a theory subject and it didn’t matter what I did, I’d only get a pass. It was like there was a ceiling put there. Other students would read my assignments and wouldn’t be able to see anything different to their assignments yet they would get distinctions and I would get passes . . . I want to believe everybody wants us to succeed but I don’t know if that’s true. Cross-cultural training should be mandatory for all lecturers (Mary).
Various students were confronted with the dilemma of trying to maintain and validate their own cultural values and knowledges whilst having to learn and appreciate knowledge that was constructed and underpinned by western values. A critical issue for students attempting to incorporate their own culture into behaviour, class discussions, assignments - was the degree to which lecturers, tutors, fellow students might understand or appreciate a different viewpoint. Some found other ways of dealing with such situations as Ben, a law student explained:

Racism is one of those things that people confront when they have to or when it’s easy . . . but for Indigenous students, they’re still . . . wary of it. They’re pretty awake up to the fact that it’s there, but often misunderstand the position as far as getting into university. It’s still there! That was my biggest — well, you know, you see it outside in the mainstream and you think . . . well it doesn’t mean that people who study are any more intellectually-minded than the bloke out on the street who’s digging the ditch. When it suits them they will both fall into the same pit. It’s a lot to do with peer pressure. We know that and accept it but we also have to confront it when we have to. A couple of years ago, Henry was here - a pale faced bloke. A group of them were criticising him for saying he was an Aboriginal. Next day I gave the four of them a heap of material on Aboriginality. A week later they handed it back to me. They didn’t say anything but they stopped calling Henry the ‘white Aboriginal’. That’s how we dealt with it. Henry was pretty upset but I said, ‘It’s something we know is there, it’s a part of life and the university is just a part of the community so it’s no different to life anywhere’.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence of the data, I concluded that the students in this study had, through their very personal revelations concerning the importance of their personal growth in line with their cultural identity, demonstrated their increasing competence to operate within both, or either, western and Indigenous frameworks. I argued that many of these students were seeking to create new discourses rather than simply engaging at the interface to buy into the discourses of the other. They were moving from the margins of the university to take their place at the centre and beginning to articulate what they wanted from the university (Herbert, 2003:257). They were empowering themselves.

It is important to acknowledge that a specific focus of this research was to explore issues around education as a tool of empowerment and whether or not Indigenous students participating in Higher Education programs in Australia, could, in fact, empower themselves through their studies, given that, over the past two centuries, education had failed to deliver on its promise for their peoples. The dialogues presented in this paper illustrate how some of the students in this diverse group discovered that they were able to take responsibility for their own empowerment once they found their own voices. This was relatively easy for those who were articulate individuals – they were simply engaging with different people and situations. For others, however, it was often a frustrating process before they reached the point where they could no longer remain silent, where they had to change their behaviour and engage in a transformational process. Significantly, most of the students who found their voice, discovered that developing the capacity to deal with issues that directly
concerned them, in a straightforward, calm manner was highly effective in getting their message across, in being able to engage other learners – their fellow students, tutors and lecturers – in discussions that inspired critical reflection and collaborative problem solving as equals. Ultimately, the reality of these outcomes – Indigenous empowerment and attitudinal change for all learners – proved the value of opening up communicative spaces that encourage learners – researchers, teachers and students – to engage in transformative learning. These outcomes also demonstrated that having transformed themselves through their engagement in empowering communicative spaces, these Indigenous students had provided the catalyst for a transformation that would enhance the capacity of their university to meet the challenges of creating educational spaces that would empower learners from a range of culturally diverse backgrounds.
References


