

Listening to hear: Critical allies in Indigenous Studies

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This paper reflects on a particular class in an undergraduate seminar in Australian Indigenous Studies where anecdote played a crucial role and where both the teacher and learners were challenged to consider their implication as racialised subjects in the teaching and learning process. The paper argues that student anecdote can be a vital bridge between theory and practice in adult learning. It suggests that all learners in Indigenous Studies, and also in studies of race and difference more generally, need to undertake effective listening and hearing practices in order to consider, imagine and engage with experiences and worldviews other than their own. Drawing from work dealing with critical alliances, discomfort in pedagogical contexts, and effective listening practices, this paper provides a conceptual analysis of the seminar in question extrapolating from this to engage critically with broader issues concerning Indigenous Studies and non-Indigenous critical allies.

Keywords: *Critical allies, Indigenous Studies, white discomfort, anti-racist pedagogy, listening practices.*

...the space in which both teachers and students are the subjects of education, cannot abstract itself from the socio-cultural and economic conditions of its students, their families and their communities (Freire, 2001: 62)

Many of us who teach ... consciously accept the fact that the work of education is as difficult for us as it is for our students, that a great deal of what occurs in seminars and classrooms seems beyond conscious reach, that in the middle of unfolding pedagogy, more often than not, we become undone (Britzman, 2009: xi).

At issue here is not a patronising notion of understanding the Other, but a sense of how the self is implicated in the construction of Otherness ... (Giroux, 1992:141)

Introduction

The above citations provide stimulus for this article which is an attempt to understand and engage theoretically with the events of a teaching and learning experience in an upper level Australian Indigenous Studies undergraduate seminar. The paper recalls a particular class where I teach concepts relevant to anti-colonialism and decolonisation in various local and global contexts with a view to engaging students as critical allies in Indigenous studies. The class consisted of two Aboriginal students, one male, one female, and fourteen non-Indigenous female students. On the occasion in question, the class discussion focused on the issues raised by an Indigenous student's narrative of racism at school. This paper reflects on the story told and on responses to it, by the student body, and by me. I consider the benefits of student accounts of their lived experience as valid knowledge, particularly as they arise in the context of teaching anti-colonialism within the institutional dominance of western knowledge and worldviews. Although the focus here is on one particular instance, the issues raised by this account are considerable. I have, however focused on three main concerns: the positive implications of classroom anecdote, white settler guilt and discomfort, and ideas surrounding effective listening and hearing practices in contexts where 'Others' are speaking. These issues are addressed with a view to finding more effective methods for identifying, and dealing with implicit and explicit expressions of racism, of coming to terms with un-ease, and engaging more truthfully and

responsively to experiences and knowledge represented by “Others”.

The paper addresses literature relating to “discomfort” arguing for its positive rather than negative possibilities for effecting alliances with Indigenous peoples’ struggles. It builds on work concerned with the politics of listening. The paper differentiates between listening and hearing, arguing for what I call a practice of “listening to hear”. I suggest that hearing what is said with a view to understanding Indigenous experience is not simply a matter of active listening. Rather, it must be accompanied by a conscious attentiveness to colonial relations of power and acquiescence to the possibilities generated by the “discomfort” arising from this awareness.

Class context and student anecdote

The context for the seminar in question was a discussion of Martin Nakata’s biographical work, *Better* (2003), where Nakata recounts his own difficulties as a Torres Strait Islander student at school and university, and also, Paulo Freire’s chapter, “Teaching is not just transferring knowledge” (2001) which explicates some of Freire’s ideas about the need for dialogic pedagogy in colonial contexts. Class discussion focused on each theorist’s ideas regarding the primacy of Western knowledge systems and the difficulties Indigenous students often face in finding a forum to speak at high school and university and importantly, to be heard in ways that attempt to understand, and engage with their lived experiences as Indigenous scholars.

During class discussion, a fair-skinned, fair-haired Aboriginal student related how the works of these theorists had helped him understand how dominant western knowledge systems had positioned him as a young Aboriginal high-school student prior to his university study. He told the class he was often advised at school by his non-Indigenous classmates to deny his Aboriginal heritage and to pass as white. His classmates had said things like: “you’re not Aboriginal”, “you can easily pass as white”, “why do you identify as Aboriginal, you must have a European background as well”? In recalling and relating these experiences, the student became visibly upset as he reflected on his own experience in light of the set readings for that week. He explained how the work of Nakata and Freire had reminded him how it had felt to be coerced into denying his cultural heritage and identity. He said it was made clear to

him that being non-Aboriginal, being white, was the better option, the more acceptable subject position. The student said he had found these interactions with his schoolmates embarrassing and humiliating and had felt worthless. He told the class he'd never discussed these high school experiences before but that he felt safe doing so in this class. I suspect this was due to his familiarity as a 300 level student with both many students in the class, and with me. However, I am aware that the notion of the classroom as a "safe space" is problematic, and especially so for Indigenous students. The student also stated that reading the work of Indigenous scholars who had written about similar experiences helped him make sense of his life as a young Aboriginal student and now, as a university student. The other Aboriginal student in the class, visibly moved by the anecdote, remained silent.

The non-Indigenous students appeared visibly distressed by this anecdote. I hasten to add that my interpretation of student reactions is partly subjective, based on considerable experience of reading students as bodies who convey emotions and responses non-verbally, but also, importantly, through listening carefully to the responses that ensued. When the Aboriginal male student paused, the student body reacted and interacted in what rapidly became a voluble discussion. One by one, a clamour of voices erupted with other narratives that recalled accounts of racism from their school days. Students took turns in voicing their observations of racism by relaying how they had also witnessed it at school, perpetrated on others, by others. The female Aboriginal student remained silent. The body of non-Indigenous female students vied for space to sympathise, and empathise, and possibly to ameliorate their discomfort — also perhaps, to assuage the discomfort of the Aboriginal students. There was a clear sense that the non-indigenous students distanced themselves from the racism that had been articulated: everyone, it seemed, had a story about racist practices in teaching and learning contexts, but each recollection of a racist incident was from somewhere else, enacted by someone else, in some other pedagogical context or social setting. Racism in the classroom was scripted as outside, not here, not present; it was the practice of others, not us. The irony of us all being in a space where anti-racism is a pedagogical focus was momentarily obscured. At the precise moment the Aboriginal student recalled being shut down by his non-Indigenous schoolmates (in what he himself had identified as a "safe space" to speak), he was

again muzzled by his non-Indigenous university colleagues in an Indigenous Studies course where the very concept of speaking positions, colonial power, and the nexus between knowledge and power in colonial discourses are under scrutiny. The room became, for a few minutes, a vibrant dialogic space between anxious non-Indigenous students. They had unwittingly, and no doubt with good intention in their eagerness to return the class to equilibrium, overridden the lived experience, discomfort, and knowledge of the Indigenous student with their own narratives of other racist practices. The Aboriginal student's emotional account of his experience had produced such disquiet; it seemed the only possible response was noise. Before I provide a conceptual analysis of this event, it is necessary to consider the relationship between classroom anecdotes, white discomfort, and listening practices as these might impact on effective pedagogies in Indigenous Studies.

Literature Review: Anecdote, discomfort and alliance

The above anecdote exemplifies the power of personal narrative in teaching and learning, as bell hooks reminds us, “[A] powerful way we connect with a diverse world is by listening to the different stories we are told” (2010: 53). When I first began teaching, anecdote was considered a classroom practice to be avoided as much as possible, often a waste of class time, a potential for student “ramblings” that were at best, inconsequential, at worst, disruptive to course objectives. Pedagogical power relations dictated that the teacher was the primary source of knowledge and that it was her/his responsibility to regulate discussion if it became anecdotal or “off-track”. Lee Ann Bell sees personal narratives as powerful pedagogical devices:

the stories we tell about race and racism can become a learning tool to help us be more conscious of historical and current realities and through this consciousness, interrupt the stories that prevent movement toward democratic and inclusive community (2010: 3-4).

Bell sees the racism in narratives as a potential starting point for producing counter histories, and for starting a conversation about the motivations of racism with a view to producing opposing standpoints. She argues that “alternative stories will and do find a voice in the counter-narratives of subordinated people and their allies from the

dominant group” (2010, 46). As the Indigenous student pointed out though, validation through the readings of Indigenous scholars was for him, an important factor in being able to make sense of the racism he experienced.

The non-Indigenous students’ responses can be best understood by considering the dis-ease that the story generated. Reference to the asymmetry of colonial power relations frequently produces anxiety in students (McGloin, 2009: 40). Zembylas and Boler argue for a “pedagogy of discomfort” whereby possibilities for transformation are located in “learning to inhabit ambiguity, discomfort and indeterminism” (2002). Disquiet or anxiety is conceptualised as a basis for disrupting the kinds of nationalism or patriotism that are inscribed in dominant national narratives at the exclusion of opposing histories and narratives. Zembylas and Boler recognise that embracing discomfort is not a simple process, “[To] embrace discomfort and ambiguity, of course, requires courage — courage to tolerate emotional uncertainty and courage to open up intellectually ...” (2002). Elsewhere, Boler suggests a rethinking of the relationship between readers and public testimonies whereby readers accept responsibility for their part in producing certain narratives. “To turn away, to refuse to engage, to deny complicity” (164-166) she argues, is constitutive of “passive empathy”. This is an important consideration in relation to the teaching context I am discussing and I will return to this point.

There is a modest body of material dealing with what is entailed in an effective critical alliance with Indigenous people in Australia (see for example, Aveling, 2004, Carnes, 2011, McGloin, 2009, 2014). Work on alliances is primarily work by non-Indigenous scholars; the suggestion is that we – non-Indigenous scholars – need to do our own hard work and think about what constitutes an ethical and fruitful alliance with Indigenous people. Research in the Australian context has yet to engage more comprehensively with ideas about anxiety or discomfort to the same degree as much contemporary research from Canada (for example, Regan, 2010, Davis, 2010), although Lynne Davis states the work is still sparse, but growing (2010: 4). Paulette Regan’s work, *Unsettling the Settler Within* (2010), examines the effects of the Canadian residential schools and provides a critical analysis of the discomfort experienced by non-Indigenous people when confronted by colonial violence. Regan’s

work challenges dominant settler narratives. Regan notes that “as a non-Native woman who had worked both for and with Indigenous people for over twenty five years ... my own deepest learning has always come when I was in unfamiliar territory culturally, intellectually and emotionally” (18). Although specific to the Canadian colonial context, Regan’s work provides compelling advice about how alliances with Indigenous people can best be effected and maintained as part of a critical pedagogical practice. Regan sees a re-conceptualisation of history as an essential requirement for effecting ethical alliances with Indigenous people. She claims that we need to expand our view of history as an intellectual engagement with the past to adopt a “critical learning practice, an experiential strategy that invites us to learn to listen differently” (2010: 50). Importantly, Regan argues that non-Indigenous allies must ““restory” the dominant-culture version of history” (6). Building on Boler and Zembylas’s concept of a “pedagogy of discomfort” (52) Regan contends that settlers, non-Indigenes, can be transformed to allies (16) and that being uncomfortable or “unsettled” with the truth discovered by revisiting colonial history (listening differently) is an important aspect of non-Indigenous/Indigenous relations (15, 17).

Lynne Davis’s introduction to *Alliances* (2010: 2) asks, “[I]s it even possible to imagine relationships of mutual respect while looking squarely at the bald truth of Indigenous trauma and dispossession that flowed from colonization historically, and is perpetuated in ongoing colonial processes of violence in the present day?” Davis and Heather Yanique Shpuniarsky discuss some of the pitfalls that can occur between Indigenous/non-Indigenous alliances,

[W]hen Indigenous and non-Indigenous people come together in alliances and coalitions, paternalism may be mobilized, subtly or overtly. There are often breeches of Indigenous social codes of which non-Indigenous people are simply not aware ... [D]espite the good intentions of allies, colonial relations can be reproduced (337).

Davis and Shpuniarsky refer primarily to social relations within Indigenous communities. Their warning can be extrapolated to other contexts though. For example, in teaching and learning where protocol is embedded in the content of anti-colonialism as an acknowledgement

of the validity of other knowledges and standpoints, a refusal to listen or politically engage with Indigenous standpoints can constitute a transgression of social codes.

Anne Bishop's influential work, *Becoming an Ally* (2002) considers some practical approaches to alliances. Although a general guide to alliance-building, Bishop's work can be extrapolated to specific situations. Bishop undermines neoliberal concepts of leadership and self-promotion often applauded as necessary attributes for students, arguing for an "unlearning" of privilege and an acknowledgement of our role in oppression. Bishop also emphasises listening as an essential practice for alliances.

The notion of learning to listen or to "hear" differently arises in work concerned with engaging politically with "others" as allies. Tanja Dreher's work, for example, (2009) focuses on "listening in" in the context of Muslim community media. She asks how certain modes of listening can be a "political process that is potentially difficult, conflictual and aimed at justice which sustains difference" (448). Dreher argues for a form of political listening where friendship and empathy are not always necessary or desirable (450) and where risk and challenge are the basis for political listening. She cites Jones' study of Māori and Pakeha students where the desire for Pakeha to understand Māori can be an "imperializing desire for absolution on the part of dominant groups – an unproductive need for reassurance" (451) which actually obscures the need for students to reflect critically on their own position of privilege or their complicity in on-going colonial relations of power. Dreher advocates a political listening practice that decentres knowing and mastery, and that risks conflict, discomfort and difficulty rather than safety and security (451). I take this to mean an active listening that consciously decentres the listening self in order to hear what an "Other" is saying, in other words to try to consider, contemplate, or *imagine* contexts outside of one's own referential or experiential framework. Risking conflict can produce discomfort, uncertainty about one's position, and a necessary re-evaluation of privilege that the risk-taker disturbed. Taking the notion of listening in another direction to consider silence in its gendered formations, Adrienne Rich's poetry sees silence as both a force of resistance and agency (Malhotra; Rowe: 11): silence can be resistant to the powers that impose it as an oppressive force, and

agentive in its capacity to provide access to new knowledges.

Taking ideas of listening and silence into the classroom as a tool for critical pedagogy can be a tricky business though. Boeseker and Gordon speak of Native American practices where imposed silences incur a “wait time” after a question is asked so that speculative thought can replace any memorised response to questions (Malhotra, Rowe, 2013:10). While formalised pedagogical practices can work in some instances, my own practice resists imposed formulaic practices in favour of aiming for an understanding of why and how (and indeed, when) silence can be useful: in other words, it’s important to develop skills that help listeners know when it is appropriate to remain silent, or indeed, to speak.

Dreher and others working as ‘critical allies’ struggle with how best to effect transformative teaching and learning practices through an active, political engagement with other voices and narratives. Roslyn Carnes, for example, calls for us to “change listening frequency”. She speaks of the ‘narrow auditory range’ of non-Indigenous subjects and the need to “tune in” and “turn up the volume” (2011: 172). Carnes argues for “apprentice allied listeners” (181) offering a visual diagram for minimising ‘white noise’ where the point of centrality is to privilege Indigenous voices (182). Similarly, Nado Aveling articulates her struggle teaching students to understand anti-racism through critical whiteness studies, “on the one hand” she states, “I want my students to ...know they can play their part in working against racism, [O]n the other hand ... this means I tend to gloss over (quite unwittingly sometimes) and almost negate the pernicious effects of institutional racism” (2004). Following Foucault, institutions are embedded with discursive practices he describes as “a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period” (1972:117). The university is thus already situated in a discourse where colonial power relations are skewed in favour of certain narratives, knowledges and pedagogical practices.

Discussion: Forging stronger alliances by listening to hear

My initial response to what happened in the class that day was to let the discussion go for a few minutes. On reflection though, my pause was probably not intentional. To be frank, the Indigenous student’s account of racism had affected me also; as a non-Indigenous teacher of anti-

colonial studies, the narrative called into question two central concerns: our – non-Indigenous people’s – acute anxiety when faced with the prospect of our own complicity in colonial practices, and secondly, our inability to hear what is being said. By the latter I mean not simply the act of listening but, drawing from Dreher and extending her ideas, to listen with the conscious knowledge of how colonial relations of power operate and how we, non-Indigenous subjects, can be active agents in re-positioning ourselves within that schema.

The Indigenous student’s disclosure is a seminal example of the discomfort produced by narratives of racism on non-Indigenous listeners. However, Boler’s notion of “passive empathy” (1999) as a denial of complicity describes the state produced by the narrative in question. It would be erroneous to suggest that students had not understood variously what they heard. While responses from the white female students were similar in their desire to re-place racism, this should not discount the diversity within that specific group; I am here dealing specifically with the discomfort noted in that response. The anxiety produced by the narrative was palpable as evidenced through the many examples of witnessed racism that competed for expression. Regan argues that attempts to decolonise (ourselves and our thinking) can often be paralysing (218). The response therefore, voluble, and perhaps inappropriate as it was, might also be read as an attempt to make sense of, or come to terms with the settler guilt that is itself an important aspect of learning about colonisation. It is also possible, though, to see the vilification of racism per se as a desire by the non-Indigenous students to position themselves as allies, to separate themselves from others perceived to be non-allies, or less enlightened. Undoubtedly, though, whether motivated by the discomfort of guilt, or by empathy, or a combination of these, one of the effects of the response to this narrative was to try to restore a conviction – a hopefulness perhaps – that somehow they/we operate “outside” of the domain of racism.

Regan tells us, “few people are enthusiastic about exploring difficult emotions that may leave them feeling hopeless ...” (32). A productive pedagogical approach therefore is to build into courses a methodology that reminds students – and teachers – that dis-ease can be a valuable starting point for a more healthy alliance with Indigenous people. Recalling the framing quote by Britzman expressing how we, educators,

become undone at various moments in the teaching and learning process, the event described here constitutes a pedagogical experience of ‘undone-ness’ where I / we, non-Indigenous learners and critical allies, were forced to address the complexity of emotional, political and cultural responses produced by the very discourses of colonialism under examination. That we were all faced with a dilemma is beyond doubt. The teaching and learning afforded by the Indigenous student’s anecdote provided us with varying contradictions, conflicts and distortions, troubling our desire for distance as it invited us to listen, to hear. Paulo Freire sees these moments of anxiety as integral to effective teaching and learning: “[E]ducation must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradictions, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and learners” (1993: 53).

Recalling Dreher’s call for a listening practice that risks conflict, I would argue further that listening – or hearing – what the “other” has to say, in fact, *must* be a risk-taking venture in order for a change in thought, perception and action to occur. If we are only to hear what is safe or familiar, there will be no conflict, no “poles of contradiction”, no impetus or motivation for transformation. It is precisely stories such as that presented by the Aboriginal student that generate an awareness of comfort and security and allow us – the hearers of such narratives – to wilfully suspend and interrogate our own privilege. In anti-colonial pedagogical contexts in particular, this risk taking form of hearing allows us to think beyond the narrative to confront our own complicity in its content. It demands time and space, room for the story to “sink in” before interrupting, or formulating responses. A more competent hearing practice for non-Indigenous teachers and learners, therefore, does not intervene for the sake of relief, indeed, does not demand respite at all, but risks the dangers of unlearning and re-learning.

Nakata et al., (2012:136) argue for an understanding of epistemological limitations of both Indigenous and Western knowledges:

[A] rationale that focus on revealing the politics of knowledge production in Indigenous Studies – one that makes space for the exploration of ideas, that insists on critical reflection on the limits of all thinking on both sides, and that requires the development

of better language for navigating such intricate and complex entanglements of meaning – provides good grounds for teaching both non-Indigenous and Indigenous students together (136).

The politics of knowledge production that shaped the Aboriginal student's recollections of being told to “pass” provided a ground-breaking opportunity for listening to hear, to engage with and understand the vicissitudes of life for many Aboriginal students.

Kevin Fitzmaurice, a non-Indigenous educator teaching Native Studies, grapples with whether we, aspiring non-Indigenous allies, are useful at all, or obsolete (2010). He asks if there can be any such thing as a white ally and claims that “the compassionate or ‘refuser’ white ally, who attempts to voluntarily give up power, remains caught within [this] ideological web of colonial privilege, where they are often a source of offense or amusement to Aboriginal people (358). Fitzmaurice echoes many misgivings by students and other non-Indigenous people working in this field whose discomfort tends to spill over into a form of hopelessness that tends to outweigh any political or ethical commitment to redressing colonial violence. Certainly, this is a common response in Indigenous Studies, particularly for students new to the discipline who, as Nakata et al note, often come to their study “ill-prepared for the knowledge and political contests they will encounter” (136).

Conclusion

Indigenous Studies teaches anti-colonialism but it is also a forum for Indigenous knowledge production. This may be imparted in the form of readings, through course material taught by Indigenous scholars or non-Indigenous allies, or through real, lived, and relevant experiences that are offered anecdotally as evidence of the enduringness of colonial violence. As Sefa Dei reminds us,

[I]ndigenous knowledge speaks to the responsibility of knowledge to promote social change ... [I]t calls for engaging discomfort and de-stabilizing knowing. It is about going where we have not been before and asking new questions (2008: 30).

I understand Sefa Dei's use of the word “responsibility” to mean that knowing demands action, that in knowing, we have an obligation to act

and that it is action grounded in the discomfort of our privilege which is required for any form of transformation. If we are to “go[ing] where we have not been”, we have to learn to listen, and to hear, with acuity, and with mindfulness.

This paper attempts to offer some insight into the role and responsibilities of non-Indigenous educators and non-Indigenous students in the field of Indigenous Studies, not just as students and educators, but as critical allies in Indigenous struggles and active detractors of racism and oppression. Any analysis of such a complex event can only be partial and will not be unproblematic. There are questions of gender, class, identity, and nation, arising from the student narrative in question that have not been addressed here and that form the basis for further exploration. Making sense of some of the epistemic issues this raised for me by this, and indeed many other classroom narratives, will be an on-going process. This particular teaching and learning event was both challenging and useful. It provided a basis for a more comprehensive understanding of how, as non-Indigenous critical allies teaching Indigenous content or curriculum, we can intervene in the colonial power relations that structure institutional learning. The classroom event provoked thought about listening practices as conscious modes of hearing what an “Other” has to say. It also inspired a critical reflection about how Indigenous learners can take on a teacherly role if they so choose, to make sense of their own lived realities, and to contribute to dialogic learning. I have argued that listening and hearing are not necessarily the same and that hearing with a sentient knowledge of our – non-Indigenous people’s – position within the colonial relations of power that structure all societal institutions, can be a starting point for productive non-Indigenous/Indigenous alliances.

Endnotes

- ⁱ ‘Critical Allies’ refers to non-Indigenous listeners, participants, activists, supporters and advocates of Indigenous rights who see themselves as working with Indigenous people as allies, comrades, learners as well as teachers rather than spokespeople for Indigenous people and rights. As a somewhat nebulous term, the notion of critical alliance requires continual scrutiny in order not to be perceived as a folksy descriptor for supporters of Indigenous peoples and rights,

but rather, as a term that denotes an active role where participation/activism takes the form of a genuine alliance alongside recognition of white privilege and the on-going effects of colonial power relations.

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About the Author

Colleen McGloin is a senior lecturer in Indigenous Studies at the University of Wollongong. Her research focus is in transformative teaching and learning through anti-racist praxis, particularly as this applies to non-Indigenous educators. Colleen is interested in what constitutes an effective "critical ally" in Indigenous struggles. Her work seeks to develop productive pedagogical strategies that will inspire students and educators towards ethical and productive alliances with

Indigenous people. She is interested in how non-Indigenous teachers and learners can become effective “critical allies” through a range of strategies that include a conscious and politically motivated form of listening and hearing.

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