**Postcolonial Thinking, Disruptive Knowledge and Pedagogical Action.**

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Summary of invited address to the business meeting of the Postcolonial Studies SIG, AERA meeting, Vancouver, April 2012.

***Introduction: Our postcolonial situation and its challenges***

In this talk, I relate postcolonial epistemology to the AERA 2012 conference theme: ‘To Know is Not Enough’ by discussing pedagogies to help education students explore, from a postcolonial angle, racism, impoverishment and international aid in education. I demonstrate some of my approaches for putting pre-service student teachers on a path of acquiring new perspectives about these global themes, and of planning pedagogical action.

My location in an Australian university is one strand of my cross-cultural background as a Caribbean scholar who has studied and worked in several countries. I have ‘lived’ postcolonial and comparative education as a student, teacher and research scholar, both in the advantaged education systems of wealthy countries and the less well-off ones of the developing world – an unusual background for a teacher educator. Drawing on these experiences, I teach how postcolonial perspectives can deepen the understanding of education (see Hickling-Hudson 2011) as a step towards changing it. My aim is to disrupt the ideological ‘comfort zones’ of most students, shaped by an entirely Eurocentric education, and to challenge them to examine and experience alternative ways of understanding education. Their new knowledge is deepened when they take the first stage of pedagogical action, working in small groups to present their chosen topic to their classmates, and turning this knowledge into a plan of teaching for a semester.

In today’s talk, I share with the Postcolonial Studies and Education SIG pictures and videos that I use as a starting point for asking student-teachers to think postcolonially about racism, inequality, and patterns of international aid to combat educational impoverishment. The framework is launched with two quotations from my region, the Caribbean, that focus attention on the postcolonial situation and its challenges:

“Post-colonial societies inherit the gross inequalities of the colonial system, along with a view of the world that tends to the acceptance of this arrangement and an education system which works to perpetuate it” Michael Manley: ‘Education: a social, political and economic strategy’.

*6th Commonwealth Education Conference,* 1974.

“Liberate yourselves from mental slavery

None but ourselves can free our minds”

Bob Marley, 1970s.

***Racism***

Most of the student-teachers who have chosen my undergraduate elective subject, ‘The Global Teacher’, start the subject from a position of commitment to striving for anti-racist pedagogies. They have started to think about what constitutes anti-racism and are eager to deepen these reflections. Systematic attention to its colonial roots and branches is the missing link in their previous knowledge about racism and fighting it (see Hickling-Hudson 2011). I ask them to investigate socio-historical contexts when examining the different ways in which racism can be manifested. Teaching strategies that I use to help them with this exploration include

* small-group class discussions, from their own experience and knowledge, of current examples of the damage caused by racism, including physical attack, murder, cultural distortion or abuse, social discrimination and marginalization, and unjustified assumptions of social superiority and inferiority
* a history quiz of world-shaping events of empire of which few have any knowledge
* a discussion of why they have so little knowledge of important world events, and a linking of this lack of information to the curriculum bias that they have experienced and the ongoing ideological distortions in much Western media including news, documentaries and film fiction
* a concept analysis of racist cartoons and current newspaper extracts that continue to use racialized language and ideology
* satires of invasion and colonization such as the Australian film, ‘Babakieuria’
* a peer-teaching session in which process drama is used to illustrate and discuss many points of view about a UK newspaper account of the racist bashing of a Pakistani migrant, and the community’s probing of the aggressors to uncover their motivation

After the drama session, taught at my invitation by three students from the final year of the drama degree, I ask my students to write short letters of thanks to their peer tutors. These extracts from their letters demonstrate the deep cultural and pedagogical impact that this strategy had on them.

“Thanks for the drama activity last week. To be honest, it was excellent. You really managed to get us to ‘feel’ the racism and the conflict. It was so real, that many of us feel bad about the incident. “

“Thank you for coming into our tutorial last week and leading us in ‘The Kelly Drama’. It was a thoroughly enjoyable and worthwhile experience, as not only did we have to learn and think about the topic of racism and racial intolerance but it also provided us all with a number of teaching strategies we can use in our own classrooms. I am someone who hates drama but the way you demonstrated how easily it can be used as a teaching tool...instantly changed my thinking and showed me that it would definitely be something I can incorporate into my own classroom. Thanks again!”

“The creative method of drama techniques to gain students’ attention was a huge paradigm shift in my learning… it was eye-opening. Racism is a sensitive topic that requires serious and careful planning when it comes to teaching…. Thank you for the learning experience you have enriched our life with.”

***Impoverishment and aid***

In asking students to think about implications of poverty-wealth patterns in societies and between societies globally, I take them through case study films, written text, and pictures from my own experience of rich and poor schools in various countries (see Hickling-Hudson 2011). These teaching aids stimulate the students to discuss and read further about how socio-economic inequality is entrenched in societies, and its consequences for the individual, the nation, and global society. The continuation of the patterns and discourses of social stratification, with their foundation in colonialism and imperialism, and continued by current patterns of globalization, extends inequality on a global scale. This trenchant quote from Steven Klees (2009) is a source of discussion for my students, since it implies the relevance of comparing historically the concepts of exploitation in slavery and in modern capitalism including capitalism’s organization of inequitable and violent education:

“I believe that some day our market system will be considered as illegitimate as slavery is now considered. The fact that the market pays some $1.50 a day for backbreaking labour, while others get millions of dollars for their white collar labour, is akin to a form of slavery, for which no one takes responsibility, and which is disguised by the rhetoric of freedom.”

The student-teachers consider the traditional and current patterns of educational aid from wealthy to poorer nations (North/South aid). Many of them want to spend a few months or years overseas, teaching in poorer countries, and my aim is to get them to think about some of the damaging implications of certain types of Western educational aid that they are likely to encounter. Catalysts that I use for disrupting their comfort zones are my photos of selected educational aid projects in Africa, followed by Carol Black’s controversial film *‘Schooling the World: The White Man’s Last Burden’*. This film powerfully examines the hidden assumption of cultural superiority behind education aid projects, their role in the destruction of sustainable indigenous communities, and their inability to provide most of the young with a viable modern alternative way of life – which are pertinent themes in all decolonizing societies.

Films such as *Schooling the World* are highly relevant to a world faced with the contradictions, problems and complexities of the current globalizing economy. In my course, I ask small groups of students to prepare illustrated, interactive seminars showing the implications of the wealth-poverty divide for education. They show a world in which the gap between rich and poor has currently become wider, the conditions of the impoverished more desperate, and the life-worlds of the planet more devastated. Students learn about the tiny proportion of the budgets of wealthy countries that go towards aid for helping poorer countries and groupings improve their education systems. Further, they learn that much foreign aid entrenches an unsuitable Western industrial model of education, which can both reinforce and exacerbate socio-economic problems.

***Exploring alternatives***

Investigating alternative approaches to education serves not only to highlight the deep flaws in the traditional Western model (Hickling-Hudson 2002), but also to build new ideas about how life-affirming, human-centred education successfully challenges negative aspects of the traditional model of Western schooling (Hickling-Hudson and Ferreira 2004). The approaches that I introduce to my students are the following:

*(i) ‘Northern’ alternatives:*

e.g. A.S. Neill’s Summerhill, Montessori, Steiner, Regio Emilio, pedagogies of critical multiculturalism, and eco-schools.

*(ii) ‘Southern’ alternatives*

e.g. Escuela Nueva (Colombia), BRAC (Bangladesh), UNICEF community schools (Egypt), Indigenous community schools (Australia, New Zealand, USA, Canada),

education through the Landless Workers’ Movement – *Pedagogia da Terra* (Brazil), post-school education through the Arts and Media (Area Youth Foundation, Jamaica), formal education restructured for equity, social justice and academic success (Cuba).

These educational alternatives are thought-provoking for students, since their understanding is deepened that the education system in which they are immersed is historically constructed, and can be redesigned. The Cuban educational alternative, for example, surprises most students, who have heard nothing but distorted and hostile reports of Cuba in the Western media. My slides of various aspects of education in Cuba, taken during more than 15 years of research visits there, illustrate many aspects of Cuban education which get students comparing these approaches to what they have learnt to take for granted in their own countries (see Hickling-Hudson 2011). The revolutionary approach taken to restructuring education in Cuba, a low-income, developing country, has brought about increased equity, social justice and nation-wide academic success that is equal to levels of success in much wealthier countries (Carnoy, Gove and Marshall 2007, Spring 2004). Cuba has built up an educated population that in turn shares its skills in internationalist projects, particularly in education and health, with other developing countries. Most Cuban educational policies are simply good policy: strong governmental planning that collaborates with education professionals, relatively strong resourcing of education, and a high level of professional and community support and collective endeavour for teachers. But Cuba also uses strategies that differ from those used by most wealthy Western countries, including its abolition of private schooling and of single-sex schooling, and the provision of free vocational and tertiary education for its citizens as well as for thousands of foreign students who are given full scholarships to study in Cuba (see Note 1, and Breidlid 2007, Hickling-Hudson 2009, Martin Sabina, Corona Gonzalez and Hickling-Hudson 2012).

*(iii) Unfamiliar ways of knowing*

In seeking postcolonial alternatives, I argue in my ‘Global Teacher’ subject that it is important for educators to start exploring epistemologies based on holistic beliefs about the health of the planet and the importance of social relations, such as the philosophies of current green movements and of ancient Indigenous cultures. My location in Australia has enriched my life with access to some of the Indigenous ways of knowing which I would not otherwise have encountered. I share with my students the decoding of a collectively done Aboriginal painting as a starting point for understanding the power of Indigenous narrative, social ideas and forms of communication. Student reflections on this activity, some of which are quoted below, provide a view of its effect on them.

“A picture tells a thousand words. This activity gave insight into something I never would have considered. What looks like art is a detailed communication system rich with history and meaning.”

“…I have learnt about appreciating and respecting other cultures. I learnt that our Western viewpoint is not the only way to do things. We look at the world through a lens and do not take the time to ask people from other cultures, ie Indigenous Australians, what they value in education. Through the close examination of the painting, it became evident that we have gotten it wrong in the past and that we should listen to what they want in education to help improve their education and lives in general.”

The practical pedagogical action taken by students presenting the theme of ‘unfamiliar ways of knowing’ is summarised by the topics they select to represent in their slides, on which they base their peer-group seminars. Some student seminars explore the relationship of education to environmental sustainability, highlighting the experimental trend towards health-promoting schools and eco-schools. The arguments that support environmental sustainability constitute an unfamiliar way of knowing for most, particularly when they read the work of scholars such as Peter Singer, Vananda Shiva, Maria Mies, Joel Spring and David Hicks. Other student seminars explore how the concept of ‘multiliteracies’ and the potential of information technologies could be used in pedagogy to open students’ horizons to different ways of knowing. Yet others carry out a reflective analysis of autobiographical accounts of educators who have spent years working in educational projects or teaching in unfamiliar cultures, such as Gemma Sisia (2007), Paula Shaw (2009) and Greg Mortensen (2010).

**Conclusion**

To summarise, in my work as a teacher educator in an Australian university, I ask students to examine how education systems and discourses derived from Western colonialism continue to operate globally, and to reflect on their own role as future teachers in helping, individually and collectively, to build alternatives in education. There are, to my knowledge, no other Education subjects in the university that systematically offer this kind of study, and most teachers graduate without encountering it. I introduce my students to a perspective variously called postcolonial, anti-colonial and de-colonial (see Andreotti 2011), which is utterly new to most of them. Through these ‘lens’ they learn how educators can:

* explain & challenge world system inequities
* challenge ‘margin’ / ‘centre’ binaries
* explore multiple centres & margins, multiple oppressions
* go beyond class & economics by incorporating complex cultural concepts to analyse societies and education, e.g. power/ knowledge discourses, representation, psycho-cultural factors, ambivalence and desire, hybridity, diversity, othering, resistance, complicity, creativity.

The alternatives that I discuss with my students include education for:

* challenging and undermining the old imperial world  order in which a few nations impose inequitable and intolerable socio-economic conditions on  the majority;
* promoting global ecological sanity as a primary  responsibility;
* considering what aspects of societies need to change in order to sustain agreed norms of equity, for women, ethnic  groups and other marginalised groups;
* yet protecting the best that has been thought, said  and created in a pluriverse of cultures whether traditional, indigenous or  modern; and
* using the power of today’s communication  systems towards these ends.

Of the many spontaneous notes that I have received from students after they have completed this subject, this is one that struck me because the student shared her reflections on the value of having her ideas disrupted:

**Subject:** Thank you letter from Emily (last name suppressed)

**Date:** Monday, 9 May 2011 2:40 PM

**To:** Anne Hickling Hudson

Dear Anne,

Thank you for the wonderful unit you taught this semester in CLB049 *(The Global Teacher).* Sorry that I didn’t email sooner, but I wanted to thank you and let you know that I feel this unit has been the most valuable that I have been taught in all my years of education. You are a wonderful teacher because now, rather than being able to just repeat facts for exams and essays, I feel as though I can really see the things you have taught with my own eyes.

The thing I see as most tragic is that teachers with the best intentions and most selfless motives are unintentionally perpetuating the cycles of oppression, racism, and social hierarchy which cause many of the issues they desperately want to overcome…I think there would few (teachers) who didn’t aspire to help people, make a difference, or at least enrich their student’s lives. These are strong motivations in my decision to study teaching and I am shocked by my own realization that many of the beliefs I would have brought to the classroom would have harmed the lives of those I was so keen to help.

This unit has been invaluable to me, and I am excited now to continue studying at QUT when there are lecturers and units as relevant, and eye opening as this. I have not just acquired knowledge, but I have been changed in a step toward becoming a better teacher and member of society. And for this I am grateful.

Emily

**Notes**

1. Cuban internationalism in education is explored in a new book, in press (2012): *The Capacity to Share. A Study of Cuba’s International Cooperation in Educational Development,* edited by Anne Hickling-Hudson, Jorge Corona Gonzalez, Rosemary Preston, New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Graça Machel, Minister of Education and Culture in Mozambique from 1975-1989 and current Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF, has this to say about the book’s portrayal of Cuba’s internationalism:

“*The Capacity to Share* is powerful testimony to Cuba’s educational solidarity. This did not end in Mozambique, Angola, Namibia, or Nicaragua, but continues as a unique approach to international cooperation between developing countries. It was offered, at a time of very great need in our country, using methods that were new to us. They produced lasting results of a very high standard….Cuba gave its knowledge and the strength of its revolutionary experience to tens of thousands of young people, sharing its very heart and soul with us.”

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