

Editorial: Culturally responsive research and pedagogy

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This special and extra issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* had its origins in an international symposium held in the Faculty of Education at the University of Waikato in November, 2010. The Faculty had already established a tradition of hosting conferences on the theme of language, education and diversity, which had been organised in 2003 and 2007 with input from the Departments of Arts and Language Education, Applied Linguistics and representatives from tainui iwi, and in recognition of the University of Waikato's strengths in respect of bicultural and multicultural education.

In 2010, the thematic focus shifted from a specific focus on language to a broader focus on Culturally Responsive Research and Pedagogy (CRRP). The symposium was deliberately small scale in order to facilitate a greater degree of ease in interpersonal dialogue among those present than often occurs at large events. Keynote presenters were Hilary Janks and Christine Sleeter (see below).¹ As it transpired, the participants as a group were characterized by a mix of experience and expertise, from seasoned scholars to fresh and eager doctoral students with an interest in the theme.

In calling for submissions to this special issue, we did not restrict it to participants in the symposium. We were happy for contributors to move beyond the focus on literacy/English, which is the typical focus for this journal. We were also happy for potential contributors to define "culture" in broad ways and to encapsulate varying understandings of what "culturally responsive" means. We were particularly interested in contributions which contextualised research or practice accounts in terms of the various hegemonies which make the conduct of culturally responsive research and pedagogy problematic. In other words, we invited contributors to bring a socially critical lens to their writing.

Why is a question of a culturally responsive education particularly relevant today? An answer to this question will depend on where one stands in relation to the current neoliberal reforms in education and, more generally, to the resurgence of nationalism in multicultural states and the neo-conservative backlash against multiculturalism (some of which will be fuelled by current unrest in areas of urban England). For some, culturally responsive education means the politicisation of cultural difference that may lead to further social divisions, citizenship issues or even to intercultural conflicts. For others, this is a matter of balancing the need to recognise the identities, cultures and languages of increasingly diverse populations and the need for social cohesion. Yet, for others, this is the way of transcending the limits of nationalism and state multiculturalism by foregrounding the ethical-political settlement of education in conditions of cultural complexity and demographic changes. All of these different

¹ Kris Gutiérrez sadly had to withdraw because of ill health.

perspectives on responsive education share a routing through historical debates about multiculturalism in the context of changing conceptions of the state as a nation-state and in response to the global flows of people, everyday experiences of intense intercultural encounters and, associated with these experiences, the quest for cultural and linguistic rights.

The idea of multiculturalism and multicultural education has its historical genealogy in the revision of the state as a nation-state in the 1970s. This revision facilitated the recognition of the pluralities of culture, language and identity and resulted in the experimentation with culturally inclusive curricula and innovative teaching practices that would provide a more active participation of students from migrant and indigenous communities and improve their learning outcomes. The explosion of policies and research into multicultural education in such countries as Canada, New Zealand, Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom and other European countries was a marker of the greater tolerance for difference and the acceptance, albeit partial, of some ethnic-communitarian claims for political, cultural and linguistic rights.

Soon after these developments in the 70s and 80s, the debates about multicultural education shifted from communitarian concerns to the rights of individuals. The proponents of individual rights argued for a model of empowering education and access to dominant knowledge and language as a protective measure from restrictions that multicultural education allegedly imposed on students from immigrant and cultural minority groups. This shift in the 90s marked a transition from the welfare to neoliberal models of educational policy-making, from the cultural to economic agendas in education. The multicultural spaces of education have been represented as educational markets, in which only the dominant culture and cultural literacy are able to fulfil the economic needs and educational aspirations of individuals (aka customers). During this time, the very needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have been rearticulated as their desires for effective and accelerated educational pathways into the cultural-linguistic mainstream.

It is important to note here that, in neoliberal and profit-focused conditions, the notion of “dominant culture” has changed as well. Not only has this culture become hybrid and inclusive of exotic or essentialised components of other cultures (for example, a cappuccino-style multiculturalism), but it has also changed its ways of engagement with difference. As Bauman (2011) argues reflecting on individual- and consumer-oriented practices, “culture today consists of offers, not prohibitions; propositions, not norms” (p. 13). Culture today is both seductive and tempting; it produces not only regulations but also consumer needs and desires. Similar processes are occurring in the political and institutional culture of education. Made-for-public consumption slogans, such as “literacy for all” or “no child left behind”, have reshaped educational contexts and the needs and desires of families and students from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Such a culture of schooling leaves little room both for students to sustain their cultural-linguistic practices, and for teachers to respond to the identities of these students and the knowledge, meanings and textual representations that are constructed in their communitarian praxis. It is for this reason that the discourses of culturally responsive education almost passed into oblivion in the context of market-driven and consumer-oriented educational reforms. And it is for

this reason that the re-engagement with the idea and practice of responsive pedagogy is particularly timely today.

Culturally responsive education can evoke a wide range of meanings in political and educational discourses. In the discourses of policy-makers, the word “responsive” has often been taken to mean no more than a “celebration” of diversity. This discourse of partial or selective recognition, however, has proven to be as exclusionary as everything it supposedly exceeded. Although much has been done to ensure equal access of minority groups to basic rights, the celebratory politics of multiculturalism has not achieved much in nation-states that have been built around a cultural core that is divisive (May, 1999). This cultural core has remained the main point of reference in deliberating the responsiveness of the state and its educational systems to the Other. In its political sense, therefore, the ability of the state to be responsive is often tantamount to the recognition of difference as “nothing more than minority cultures whom it would ‘grant’ such rights as it unilaterally determines” (Parekh, 1999, p. 74). In its educational governmentality sense, it is this core that has enabled the cultural majority to claim the monopoly in defining what counts as a good curriculum and good teaching, as well as being the final arbiter of their standards and values.

Responsiveness to difference, as a partial recognition of the Other from a culturally dominant position, has failed by and large to trigger critical self-reflexivity and open-minded dialogue between cultures. It has failed to address the power-grounded relationships among identity construction, textual representations and struggles over social justice (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). As a result, neither the state nor its educational systems can respond to difference ethically in the current political climate, when the matters of cultural and social inequalities and cultural-religious tensions have become more apparent, particularly due to the ongoing war against terrorism and domestic security and border protection measures. In such a climate, the attention and efforts have shifted from the project of building egalitarian multicultural states to making these states cohesive, with many even suggesting the abandonment of state multiculturalism and a return to assimilation politics. The neo-conservative discourses have come to dominate political debates, leading to recasting citizenship and migration laws according to security considerations and to the reformulation of national identities and national curricula as culturally exclusive.

Responding to this neo-conservative backlash and its pedagogical clampdown is a complex issue. In the current political circumstances, this requires the mobilisation of a critical genealogical lineage of responsive education – one that has always run parallel to education practices sanctioned by state multiculturalism. A critical sense of responsive pedagogy stems from radical political movements and struggles for rights. This sense, as Sleeter (1991) once pointed out, “has always been grounded in a vision of equality and has served as a mobilising site for struggles within education” (p. 10). As such, responsive pedagogy has emerged within the critical multiculturalism tradition as a counter discourse to the conservative and neoliberal forms of education. As a form of education situated in the larger project of building democratic societies, responsive pedagogy engages with the transmissive forms of schooling, the politics of difference, Othering and unequal power relations in education and beyond (May & Sleeter, 2010). In doing so, it brings a different meaning to the word “responsive”, signifying a sense of responsibility that charts new directions for the politics and ethics of teaching in conditions of cultural complexity.

In his last book, *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Paulo Freire (2001) urges all educators who seek an alternative to repressive education to renew their efforts in combating the cultural and social forms of discrimination. Responsive pedagogy has this transformative potential if it continues revealing and engaging with social conditions that effect the education of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Such pedagogy requires a political commitment to pursue social justice in and through education as well as a rigorous grounding in the relational ethics of practice. As Freire argues, “the best way for this ethics is to live it in our educative practice, in our relations with students, in the way we deal with contents of what we teach...” (2001, p. 24). This probably captures the essence of responsive pedagogy as praxis situated in the experiences of active relationships with others.

Thus, responsive pedagogy is about an opening of new possibilities, a reopening of an invitation to participate in a dialogical enquiry that goes out and beyond ourselves. It invites teacher and students to become more aware of their conditions and more responsible for their actions in the world. Where the everyday practices of teaching and learning are concerned, it means becoming response-able to the many and different voices of others so that answers to the hard questions of “why” and “what” transcend a conventional truth about the social world. Responsiveness in these dialogical events involves more than just the building of one’s critical consciousness through empowering education. It encompasses a relational ethics of respect and care, to echo Noddings’ (1999) idea, where students and teachers convey their issues and concerns and construct new meanings through active listening and responding to others. Since culturally responsive pedagogy concerns the relation to Others (that is, the stranger, the heterogeneous, the different, and so on), and since it involves a critical engagement with the world, this form of education is a political-ethical praxis that may enable us to reach towards still untapped possibility, as well as preventing us from deceiving our conscience.

This special issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* features articles that put culturally responsive pedagogy back on the agenda. Christine Sleeter opens the issue with a careful exploration of the current situation in the US and elsewhere that has contributed to the marginalisation of culturally responsive pedagogy. She argues that neoliberal reforms have negated the central importance of context, culture and racism as the foci of transformative learning that culturally responsive pedagogy supports. Although standards-based reforms have been justified, at least rhetorically, by the aim of closing the racial achievement gap, these reforms remain context-and culture-blind. In addressing this and other problems, Sleeter is also critical of simplistic ways of using and understanding of what counts as culturally responsive pedagogy. She offers an alternative to those approaches that essentialise, trivialise or depoliticise cultural differences. To counter all this, the article calls for the strengthening of culturally responsive research base that would enable educators to engage with the detrimental effects of neoliberal reforms in education and their political backlash.

Alex Kostogriz’ article continues discussing some key points raised by Sleeter. It focuses more specifically on the recent initiatives of the Australian government to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage in literacy. Kostogriz reviews literacy intervention programs in Aboriginal schools and provides an analysis of these programs by drawing on Nancy Fraser’s inquiry into the widening gap between

cultural politics of difference and the social politics of equality. According to Kostogriz, literacy intervention programs in Australia have been concerned either with the recognition of Indigenous cultures and textual practices or with the redistribution of the dominant cultural literacy to empower Aboriginal students. In the pursuit of empowerment, however, neoliberal governments and intervention programs financed by them have acquired a very explicit assimilatory agenda and linguistically repressive outcomes. This article turns to ethics as hospitality offered to the other in literacy education and as a way of addressing both recognition and redistribution of cultural literacies that are demanded by a socially just education.

The articles by Sleeter and Kostogriz prepare a context of engaging with issues of culturally responsive teacher education and teaching practice. Hilary Janks and Roseline Angeloke explore the role of critical pedagogy in a postgraduate program situated in a university in South Africa. This article narrates experiences of Othering and exclusion in a critical literacy class. These experiences triggered a further investigation of the media and popular discourses that produce xenophobia in the South African context and lead to forms of exclusion. By analysing these discourses and a film, *District Nine*, Janks and Angeloke explicate how xenophobic discourses affect the collective unconscious of South Africans, triggering arrogance and intolerance when confronted by the unknown or foreign other. The paper calls for educators concerned with issues of social justice to take these issues into the classroom and to include work on xenophobia in the curriculum. In particular, *District Nine* is presented as powerful “text” that has been designed to deconstruct and satirise apartheid’s practices of segregation, exclusion and othering as well as to critique the violence used to enforce racist policies in today’s South Africa.

The article by Suzanne Knight continues the topic of teacher education and practice raised by Janks and Angeloke, albeit drawing on a different set of intellectual resources. Knight is interested in how one’s exploration of positionality and narrative inquiry can lead to reflexive professional learning and teacher education more generally. The article argues that educating responsive teachers demands that they engage in the examination of their own experiences of exclusion or subjugation and of the affective side of such experiences. This in turn may lead to the re-examination of their values and beliefs about what teaching others means. Knight believes that pre-service teachers’ reflections on and exploration of their own positionality, as predominantly representing white and middle-class backgrounds, may create spaces where they interrogate how race, class or gender have afforded them certain privileges. It is through this kind of reflexivity that they may build a sense of difference or solidarity with the experiences of others as well as understandings of how to respond to the diverse student populations they teach.

Jesson, McNaughton and Parr shift the focus of discussion to teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. This article examines the effects of intertextuality and transfer of learning in rethinking writing pedagogy. It presents the case studies of four teachers that were involved in an intervention program and that were able to reposition the relationship of learners to texts by using intertextuality as a core principle of writing pedagogy. The authors argue that building and drawing on intertextual understandings in culturally diverse classrooms have the potential to change students’ engagement with writing. The article examines how writing instruction can be redesigned in a way that affords transfer of learning and textual experiences and facilitates textual inquiry.

By situating knowledge about writing within the reading and analysis of actual texts, Jasson, McNaughton and Parr see potential for developing rich and multiple understandings and for building both situated and authoritative textual knowledge. This article offers a view of intertextuality as something that can afford culturally responsive teaching.

The final topical article of this issue, written by David Whitehead, explores the paradox relating to gender-responsive pedagogies, specifically those that supposedly address the needs of boys. It shows how pedagogies that are informed by certain forms of neuroscientific representation of gender differences can actually *reinforce* the deficit construction of boys. By presenting a case study of a private school for boys in New Zealand, Whitehead reveals how the discourse of neuroscience conflicts with potentially more productive approaches relating to an expanded view of literacy practices. As an alternative to scientific essentialism, the article illuminates a parallel discourse around principles of learning that influence teacher pedagogy in that school. As a result, teachers in the school draw on two discourses that allow the school, albeit in different ways, to build a gendered educational culture for boys and to place the school in a competitive education market. This article cautions, however, the uptake of popularised neuroscientific discourses in informing a gender-responsive pedagogy and meeting the educational needs of boys.

We have also included in this issue, an article in dialogue, written in the Taiwanese context by Wen-Chuan Lin and Shu Ching Yang. Taking up themes explored in the December, 2009 issue on “English afloat on a digital sea” (Volume 8, Number 3), this article investigates whether the use of Wiki technology paired with peer review in an EFL context improves students' writing skills. This study found that most students explicitly stated that they felt positive about their ability to apply Wiki and peer feedback to writing instruction. Meaningful social interaction appeared to play a significant role with regard to students' perceived benefits of this collaborative writing process. Students nevertheless encountered both functional and psychological obstacles to using the new tools, indicating the need to alter their traditional learning practices to embrace new, technology-enhanced learning systems.

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