Creating Spaces for Pedagogy: Research as Learning

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Abstract

As teacher-educators, we designed and implemented a small study that mapped teacher-education students' understandings of their own identities and how they made sense of ethnicity and class differences among their secondary students while on teaching rounds. While we didn't set out to 'teach' our research participants, it was during the analysis of data from the research project, that we began to realise the potential of research to create opportunities for learning. In this paper we speculate on the 'conditions' of knowledge production and suggest that the dialogic nature of interviews and focus group discussions can offer pedagogical spaces for learning. Research designs that incorporate opportunities for participants to re-tell narratives over periods of time, may position participants as experts in knowledge production and may reposition them and researchers in more equitable power relations. We present an example of one participant's narrative together with our interpretations to explore how research potentially offers 'evidence' of learning. While this is tentative only, we suggest there is a need to create spaces for pedagogy in the design and execution of educational research.

Introduction

Our study, 'A Different Quality Practicum: Investigating student-teachers' understandings of sameness and difference'[1] aimed to explore how pre-service teacher education students construct their own identities and how they make sense of their students' ethnic and classed identities as they work with them during teaching rounds in inner city schools. We saw the knowledge we would gain from this project as valuable for its potential to inform our practices as teacher educators, and more broadly, inform teacher education seeking to develop student-teachers' skills and knowledge to work effectively with students from a range of diverse ethnic and classed identities. However, while we hadn't set out to teach our research participants,

it was during the analysis of the research data that we began to realise how the participants viewed their involvement in the project as productive of new and different understandings of self and other. We were surprised by how often they commented that the research process, in particular, the conversations that took place in focus groups and interviews, helped them think differently about ethnicity, class and gender – their own as well as others'. Furthermore, when we examined data collected at the beginning of the project with data collected towards the end of the project some ten months later, we began to see shifts in our participants' thinking. On the basis of these experiences we have begun to consider the links between research and pedagogy and the potential for research to provide spaces or opportunities for learning to occur.

In this paper we argue that a research design incorporating opportunities for participants to re-tell narratives over periods of time, the dialogic nature of interviews and focus group discussions, and more equitable power relations between our participants and ourselves as researchers have created 'conditions' of knowledge production (Lusted 1986) and spaces for pedagogy. We present a small excerpt of data from a focus group discussion and an interview with one of our research participants to highlight how participation in the research might be interpreted as a catalyst for learning.

Overview and Context of Study

We saw the focus of our project on examining 'constructions of sameness and difference' as central to our work as teacher educators preparing the next generation of teachers. Like many researchers in the UK and North America (Causey et al 2000, Cochrane-Smith 2000, Delpit 1995, Ladson-Billings 1992, 2000) we recognised the increasing importance of enabling teacher education students to work productively in culturally diverse classrooms. Because of the increasing diversity of student populations in Australia (ABS 2001) and elsewhere (Causey et al. 2000, Olmedo 1997, Rosen & Abt-Perkins 2000, Rushton 2000), competency in designing pedagogies and curriculum that attend to difference has become a professional imperative.

Working productively with diverse student populations is dependent on teachers recognising how discourses of schooling shape students' ethnic and classed identities and can frequently position them as 'other' and marginal to the concerns of mainstream education. Teachers also need to engage with students whose ethnic and classed identities are different from their own in ways that create learning environments that build on and work with diversity. However, too often, when markers of identity such as 'gender, ethnicity, race, and class' are discussed in teacher

education programs, the focus is on the learner, that is, students' identities. Such an approach often works to position students from minority cultures as potential classroom 'problems' that need to be understood in order to be 'managed'. It also leaves the subjectivities of teacher education students unexamined and does not challenge the power relations inherent in mainstream educational frameworks.

Increasingly, research highlights the importance of pre-service teacher-education students beginning from their personal constructs in order to develop an understanding of how one is positioned by the discourses of social class and ethnicity (Britzman 2003, Causey et al 2000, McWilliams 1994). It was this approach that we believed we needed to adopt in our teacher education programs. In order to do so, we needed first to understand how our students understood themselves as classed and encultured. Significant numbers of our teacher education students are members of the dominant Anglo-Australian mainstream, have attended 'white', middle class schools as students and as student teachers and have limited experience of learning or working in diverse educational settings. Their understandings of others are often based on taken-for-granted values and beliefs about themselves as 'normal'. One of the challenges facing us is to find ways to dis/place their sense of 'centrality' and enable them to interrogate their assumptions about what is 'normal'. Starting from a poststructuralist framework that understands subjectivities as context specific, negotiated and fluid social relations that are changing and changeable in ongoing ways (Weedon 1999), our project focused on collecting data from pre-service education students about how they constructed their own positionings as ethnic and classed and how they made sense of their students' identities as they worked with them during teaching rounds.

The study involved eight pre-service teacher education students over ten months. Data collection took place in three stages; before, during and after their practicum in inner city schools with ethnically and culturally diverse student populations. During stage one the students participated in a two-hour focus group where group discussion elicited information about how they constructed their own positionings in terms of social class and ethnicity. In stage two, during their practicum, each student kept a reflective journal where they noted their concerns, issues and experiences. As researchers and teacher educators, we also kept fieldnote journals reflecting upon our visits to each student-teacher during their rounds and engaged them in discussions about the professional and personal challenges of teaching ethnically diverse students of low socio-economic status. In stage three, following the three week practicum, the students were individually interviewed to follow up pertinent issues that had arisen during their practicum. A final Focus Group interview was held to enable students to compare and reflect on their experiences.

Power/Knowledge In Research Relations

Recent sociological research in education as well as feminist research, has produced many debates about what Paechter calls 'aspects of power-knowledge as it operates within a specific community: that of qualitative, mainly educational researchers' (1996, p. 75). These debates have often centred on issues concerning research 'with' and/or 'on' subjects and discussions about hierarchy and power relations between the 'researcher' and 'researched' as well as how researcher/research participant relationships are played out in interview situations (for example, Fine 2003, Hey 2000, Smith 1987). Furthermore, the interview situation is increasingly understood as 'a situation of knowledge production in which knowledge is created between the views of two partners in the conversation' (Kvale 1996, p. 296). While the notion of co-produced data is sometimes ignored by researchers keen to establish interview data as 'truth', McLeod notes, '…acknowledging the construction and partiality of truth and power relations in interviews is now essential' (2003, p. 201). Drawing on the work of Scheper-Hughe's notion of the 'cultural self', Olesen asserts that what 'every researcher takes into his or her work is no longer a troublesome element to be eradicated or controlled but rather a set of resources' (2003, p. 355).

While we consciously positioned our research participants as narrators of their own stories – experts of their own experiences, we also acknowledge that we are responsible for co-producing the research data. Therefore, we see our students' stories, told in both the focus groups and the individual interviews, as dialogical. Following Bakhtin's view of all utterances as dialogic, Morson and Emerson claim that the texts produced through interview belong to two people, the speaker and the listener.

> The listener must not only decode the utterance, but also grasp why it is being said, relate it to his own complex of interests and assumptions, imagine how the utterance responds to future utterances and what sort of response it invites, evaluate it and intuit how potential third parties would understand it. Above all, the listener must go through a complex process of preparing a response to the utterance … utterances can belong to their speakers (or writers) only in the least interesting, purely physiological sense; but as meaningful communications, they always belong to (at least) two people, the speaker and his or her listener (Morson & Emerson 1990, pp. 127-129).

Furthermore, we, along with the students' peers, intervened, questioned and contributed our own stories during interviews and/or focus groups. Alternatively, our silences around issues that they raised also may have contributed to how they made sense of their experiences. In these ways, the social interactions inherent in interviews

and focus group interviews helped construct our participants' narratives and our own understanding of them.

Research Methods and Pedagogical Spaces

Rarely used by teachers, the term 'pedagogy' has been commonly used by academics and educational researchers in the last twenty years. Manen asserts that it is often used as an alternative to 'teaching', 'a buzzword that has replaced the terms teaching, instruction or curriculum' (1999, p. 15). In this sense, it often fails to take account of how social relationships are inherent in processes of teaching and learning and how schooling is located within particular ideologies and discourses of power. Frequently, however, 'pedagogies' can take a critical, feminist or radical perspective for example, and are offered as alternatives to mainstream pedagogies by those interested in socio-political approaches to education. Gore argues for a meaning that includes both instruction, that is, 'an act or process of teaching' (1993, p. 3) and social vision. She claims that that this view is 'consistent with the political underpinnings of much radical educational discourse … and its concern for how and whose interests knowledge is produced and reproduced (1993, p. 5). Drawing on the work of Lusted (1986), Gore asserts that the 'how' of knowledge production is 'a focus on the processes of teaching that demands attention be drawn to the politics of those processes and to the broader political contexts within which they are situated' (1993, p. 5). According to Lusted the concept of 'pedagogy'

> …draws attention to the process through which knowledge is produced. Pedagogy addresses the 'how' questions involved not only in the transmission and reproduction of knowledge but also in its production. Indeed, it enables us to question the validity of separating these activities so easily by asking under what conditions and through what means we 'come to know'. How one teaches … becomes inseparable from what is being taught and, crucially, how one learns (Lusted 1986, pp. 2-3).

Lather, also drawing on the work of Lusted claims that pedagogy

> …denies the teacher as neutral transmitter, the students as passive, and knowledge as immutable material to impart. Instead, the concept of pedagogy focuses attention on the conditions and means through which knowledge is produced. All pedagogies are situated – specific and contingent to the cultural fields within which they operate (1992, p. 121).

We propose that our research provided pedagogical spaces, that is, opportunities for our participants to 'come to know' – to produce knowledge. The 'conditions' of knowledge production, that is the 'how' through which they 'came to know' were the research methods and processes integral to our research design. For example, story telling formed the basis of our interviews and focus groups. According to Mattingly 'Telling stories is a way of making sense of what has happened, enabling us to access a level of meaning that we were only dimly aware of while living through an experience' (Mattingly, in Mulholland & Wallace 2003, p. 6). Mills claims that her respondents' identities 'came into being by communicating' them (2001, p. 298) through the interview process. Thus, the telling of stories is not just a means of gathering data; the identities of the participants are presented and (re)presented through the construction and reconstruction of these stories (McLeod 2000). This knowledge production occurs intersubjectively. Similarly, the conversations that occur in focus group discussions are also a way of speaking ideas into existence and a site for the co-production of meaning by researchers and peers. However, the focus group as a data collection method, can also 'give participants more power to take control of the topic of conversation and shape their own narratives' (Kosny 2003, p. 541). According to Wilkinson (1998), in focus groups 'the researcher's power and influence is reduced because she has much less power over a group than over an individual' (p. 114).

Furthermore, we provisionally claim that it was the opportunity for teacher education students to retell narratives in interviews and focus groups over a period of ten months that allowed them to not only gain insights into their own beliefs but also to reflect on the impact and interaction of their beliefs on others. That is, speaking their stories again in a different place after a period of time in which they had time to reflect and examine others' perspectives, enabled the students to re-present their stories in ways that also took account of the reactions and comments of others. Consequently, it seemed to us that the meanings and sense of the individual stories altered through the interventions of those who were more than 'just listeners'.

To demonstrate how we are working with the notion that particular kinds of qualitative research methods can provide spaces for pedagogy, we now draw on data from a focus group discussion and an individual interview with one of our participants, Kylie. In the following section, we contrast data from the first individual interview and from the second focus group discussion, together with our interpretations to suggest how Kylie's understandings of gendered and ethnic identities have shifted. By considering and comparing the changes that take place in her telling and re-telling of the same experience, we aim to show how we read these narratives as potential evidence of learning.

At the time of the study Kylie[2] was in her early twenties and in her second year of a pre-service postgraduate teaching degree. During the first focus group, when we asked participants to talk about their own ethnic and classed identities, Kylie described herself as 'Australian and middle class'. She grew up in a provincial Australian town with a mainly Anglo-Australian population where she claims she had little 'exposure' to cultural diversity. She mentioned that her mother was trained as a nurse and her father worked as a labourer in the town.

A story told during interview

Researcher: Is there anything you've learned [on practicum] about teaching for diversity? For example, about curriculum or student relationships?

Kylie: There is one issue, I think I told you about which is being aware of the different religions and their different beliefs. My instance was that I had a couple of Muslim boys in my class and I was told, before I even realised, I should have asked, but I just didn't think. I was told that with these Muslim boys, if a new female teacher comes in, that female teacher has really got to stand up for herself and tell them that she's in charge and that they are to respect her.

Researcher: So who told you this?

Kylie: … I was told by Sally's [another student teacher] supervising teacher. When I came back [from the class] and I said, 'Oh I'm having trouble with this student.' She said 'Right, come and have a chat with me.' So she took me upstairs and she told me about this and she gave me the senior school rules and said 'Next time they do that – they will know this document. You get it out, you point to these things, you know, 'you must respect the teacher', 'everyone has the right to learn', 'everyone has the right to teach', 'mobile phones are not allowed', you know, that kind of thing and you get that document out and you use it.' I then knew – right, I can't give them any slack at all. When I say, 'move to another desk', straight away they move. I don't give them another chance like I was doing. I was trying to be friendly like the other teachers tended to be, like having a bit of a joke with them and I kept on saying 'I don't want to move you. Please be quiet, get on with your work'. That wasn't working; they weren't respecting that.

Researcher: And why did you interpret their lack of respect for women as due to their religion?

Kylie: That's because that's what Anna [Sally's supervising teacher] said. She said, 'They're arrogant bastards', that's what she said.

Researcher: But it could well be –

Kylie: That they're just arrogant bastards. Yes.

Researcher: Well, they are male – [laughter]

Kylie: Very very true but she took it as because of their religion … like I knew about the head scarves that the females wear and then, speaking to a couple of other teachers, they did tell me that some of the Turkish-Australian boys see the females, if they haven't got the head set [Muslim headscarf] over them, as 'easy', that they're 'sluts', that kind of thing. That's just from the way they've been brought up. But I still don't know whether, maybe it's not a religion thing because they were very Australian. I hate saying that but they were … yes, they really were. They were into AFL [Australian Football League], 'Hey mate', you know just those kinds of colloquialisms. They were Australian.

Researcher: And that could well be much more of a gendered thing than a cultural –?

Kylie: I think so … but I just don't have enough kind of knowledge to know. I'm so sheltered, I just don't know.

Our Interpretation:

Kylie's need to feel respected is a key feature in this first telling and her own anxiety about how to 'manage' difficult students is foregrounded. She constructs herself as 'unknowing' and naïve about issues of class management involving these students, students who are representative of ethnic groups she has had little interaction with in the past. Because she didn't know enough, 'didn't realise' and 'didn't think' to ask her supervising teacher about the students' cultural backgrounds, she was unknowingly too friendly and insufficiently 'wary' of them and their potential to disrupt her class and undermine her authority. Her naïvety has made her reliant on more experienced teachers who are familiar with this school context and these students in order to make sense of her encounters with the students.

Anna's explanation that it is the boys' religion that causes them to be disrespectful of women is one that Kylie readily takes up in the early stages of her story. While she acknowledges the researcher's suggestion that maybe the students' behaviour had more to do with gender then religion, ('very very true'), she immediately goes on to reiterate Anna's view, supporting it with 'evidence' from discussions she's had with other teachers

about the relationship between Muslim boys and those Muslim girls who don't wear Islamic dress. However, perhaps because of the researcher's intervention she is prompted to consider another possible explanation for the students' behaviour and begins to question whether the boys' apparent lack of respect for women is an inevitable outcome of their upbringing as Muslims. She begins to explore other ways of making sense of their actions. Religion is no longer the primary signifier at this point in her story. She goes on to construct 'Australian' identity and Muslim identity as binary opposites – 'maybe it's not a religion thing because they were very Australian'. One cannot be a Muslim and a 'real' Australian male at the same time. Her understanding of 'Australian' male is exemplified by the stereotypical 'Australian bloke' who calls people 'mate' and understands Australian Rules football. Her use of 'I hate to say it' suggests that after coming to the conclusion that these boys are in fact Australian, she is somewhat annoyed to find that Australian males can also be disrespectful towards women, a characteristic she might have been more willing to attribute to Muslim males, 'the other'.

It is clear that as an inexperienced teacher, Kylie is seeking explanations for the difficulties she is experiencing with class management and is reliant on supervising teachers such as Anna, to 'take her under her wing', to tell her what needs to be done and how to assert her authority. If it is indeed the case that the students' religion or their gender is the cause of their disrespectful behaviour towards her, to some degree, she can view her difficulties with class management as inevitable and herself as blameless.

Some Months later . . .

In the final focus group Kylie recounts the same experience to her peers. However, in this different context and some months after her practicum and first interview she tells her story quite differently. She says:

> **Kylie:** I had a couple of boys in my class that were Muslim and I had Anna [another student's supervising teacher] come up and she said to me, 'Look they're arrogant arseholes'. That's exactly what she said. 'You need to – here's the school rules, read them to them and if they have any problems with them come to me'. She told me, 'Basically, really get them, don't let them get away with absolutely anything just because you're female'. So I went in with a preconceived thought, an idea that they're arrogant just because I'm female and they're not going to listen to me. Which to a degree was possibly true. But I think in my mind, I kept on thinking – is it because of their religion, because of the way they have been brought up and their beliefs that they're doing this? There are other guys in the class who do the same thing and were just as arrogant and were just as obnoxious and had behaviour problems and they were

Anglo-Saxon and probably Christian. I couldn't say – but possibly. So my pre-conceived idea was that it was because of their religion, because of what Anna had told me when I don't think it is now. Possibly it contributed but it certainly wasn't the whole thing.

Researcher: I mean we're very quick to often say it's because they're Muslims and their religion tells them to do this, that and the other. In actual fact, we often don't know very much about what people's religions tell them to do and how they choose to interpret religion. We're very quick to assume that it's because of that –

Kylie: I say I'm Christian but that doesn't stop me or make me do anything in my entire life. Possibly the way I've been brought up is how I will do something, but certainly not because Jesus has told me to do it. So who's to say if you're Muslim it's that's way? Yeah, I think that stereotype that I had in my head and where I kept on thinking it's because of their religion and then towards the end I started to think, well actually, I don't know whether it really is. I just think it's because they're 14 and 15 year old boys.

Unlike her first recount, where Kylie constructs herself as, naïve and unknowing, and ready to take up the explanations offered by supervising and practising teachers about why her students behave poorly in class, in this second telling, Kylie presents herself as more independent and asserts her own opinion. She openly admits going into class with 'a preconceived idea' about the influence of religion on the boys' behaviour. However, now she is less certain that the students' behaviour was due to 'religion' and questions whether it was an expression of a particular form of masculinity. Again, more strongly in the second telling, she notes that other, (that is, non-Muslim, 'Anglo-Saxon', and 'probably Christian') males performed in the same way – they were 'just as arrogant and just as obnoxious'.

In responding to the researcher's assertion that 'we're very quick to often say it's because they're Muslims', Kylie immediately locates herself in the debate about just how influential religious practices are on one's actions, asserting that it is not her religion that makes her act in particular ways. In bringing into the conversation her own religious upbringing, perhaps Kylie is seeking to find parallels with her experiences and those of her students. However her fall-back to 'family upbringing' as an explanation seems to us to ignore the ways in which gender, ethnicity, class, 'race' are all part of 'family' constructions of identity. By hiving off one dimension of identity, she misses the fluid and complex ways in which gender, religion and family all may play a part in shaping the boys' behaviours.

Nevertheless, her struggle to move beyond the religious or cultural stereotypes as explanations for the young males' behaviours suggest to us the ways in which Kylie herself has begun to work through the multi-dimensionality of identities – including her own. In the second retelling, she appears to be questioning both the teacher's explanation and the researcher's explanation about the boys' behaviour being due to either religion or gender. The two versions of the same story suggest the struggles and the shifts she is making in thinking about how identity can shape interactions between teachers and students. We see this as evidence that Kylie is now beginning to consider the complexities of identity constructions.

Conclusion

As noted, one of our aims for this project was to find more effective ways to work with future teacher education students so that they become aware of and skilled in teaching diverse student groups. By exploring the participants' understandings of identity and difference through the interviews and focus groups, we sought to develop richer, more productive insights into how we might help teacher education students to see themselves as having the potential to become agents of change and activists in order to produce more socially just educational outcomes for those students who benefit least from schooling. In doing so, we have also become aware of the potential for research to create spaces for pedagogy. While we don't know that the shifts in Kylie's thinking wouldn't have occurred outside her participation in our project, we argue that particular 'conditions' conducive to students 'coming to know' were a significant component of our research. Indeed, many of these 'conditions' are integral to most qualitative research.

Firstly, research design is a particular 'condition' conducive to research becoming a pedagogical space. As we have noted already, the choice of semi-structured interviews and focus groups as a major source of data collection repeated over a period of ten months may have provided the participants with the time and opportunities to reflect on and to retell their 'stories' in ways that we regard as 'evidence' of changed understandings. Secondly, we propose that another 'condition' that enabled our research participants to 'come to know' were more equitable power relations between the students and ourselves as teacher educators/researchers. Because they were 'positioned' as the narrators of their own stories, this changed the usual power relations from traditional classroom contexts where 'right-wrong' answers combined with the taken-for-granted power dynamics between teacher-student (expert-novice) can work against personal risk-taking with new ideas. Additionally, the opportunity for them to explore their own identities in a 'safe environment' with engaged and interested peers who shared the experience of participating in the research project and who all worked in the same two schools

meant that they developed a sense of commonality – and perhaps a degree of trust since they all experienced similar challenges. We acknowledge that even these steps do not adequately address the asymmetrical power relations implicit in the 'researcher-researched' binary. However, by relocating the 'researched' as 'expert' narrators of their own stories, by accepting their versions of events non-judgementally, by encouraging dialogue not only with us but with their peer groups, we argue that the power relations in the research become far less fixed, more fluid, negotiable and potentially more equitable.

We suggest it was their involvement in the research project that empowered the students to think about their identity investments and provided them with the experience and space to think about these differently. Thus, while we suggest that a research project such as ours has the potential to create spaces for transformative and empowering pedagogy, we heed the warnings of scholars such as Gore (1992) and Ellsworth (1992) who speak of the need to problematise the notion of empowering pedagogy and teachers as 'agents of empowerment' (Gore 1992).

When the agent of empowerment assumes to be already empowered, and so apart from those who are to be empowered, arrogance can underlie claims of "what we can do for you". This danger is apparent both in the work of the teacher who is to empower students, and in the work of the academic whose discourse is purportedly empowering for the teachers (and others) (Gore 1992, p. 61).

We recognise our own positionings as 'narrative-creators' and 'narrative-finders' (Kvale 1996) and that our interpretations of our participants' stories are shaped ultimately by our own experiences, our readings of the context and the assumptions we make about our students and their 'need' to take on new and different perspectives. Such readings and assumptions are, and only can be, subjective.

This paper has raised issues around the importance of deliberately creating spaces for pedagogy in the design and execution of educational research. It is not simply a recording of participants' prior experiences, knowledges and beliefs but potentially a dynamic opportunity for teacher education students to begin to understand how new knowledge is produced, how it can change and how research can contribute to professional knowledge and improved practice.

Endnotes

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[2] All names are pseudonyms

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