Affecting change through assessment: improving indigenous studies programs using engaging assessment

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Warawara, the Department of Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University offers a degree in Community Management, the BCM, which is a designated program exclusively for Indigenous students. It also offers Indigenous Studies units which are available to all students. The Australian Learning and Teaching Council funded the Leadership in Assessment Project (LEAP) which was first implemented in the Department in July, 2007 and has achieved some extraordinary outcomes in that short time. The leadership provided over the course of the LEAP project has created opportunities to open up previously closed avenues of communication, training and support for Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics working in the department. This has resulted in a gradual but radical change in culture which has improved units of study using engaging assessment as the catalyst. This paper reflects on the processes involved in creating a productive, generative interface in which important issues in Indigenous education may be discussed.

Introduction

This paper reflects on some of the challenges, issues and processes involved in conducting research at Warawara, Department of Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University. The Department offers a degree in Community Management, which is a designated program exclusively for Indigenous students, and Indigenous Studies units which are available to all students. Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff members participated in the research.

Research is perceived by many Indigenous peoples and some non-Indigenous people as a vehicle of colonialism. 'Research' is a dirty word for many Indigenous academics because of the ways in which it is implicated in damaging, controlling and dispossessing Indigenous peoples globally (Smith, 1999). This is arguably as much the case whether it is a non-Indigenous person (as I am) who proposes to conduct research in Indigenous contexts or an Indigenous person.

This paper presents an account, against this backdrop of historic suspicion, caution and defensiveness, of the creation of a productive, generative interface between teachers, using Participant Action Research (PAR) (after Kemmis & McTaggart, 1998). PAR, as I will argue, was able to provide a framework for developing a decolonising methodology that opened a space where colleagues were able to create a new community of engagement: an interface for intercultural communication (Nakata, 2007).This interface continues to facilitate an evidence based, reflexive research focus for learning and teaching and promotes the dissemination of knowledge among colleagues.

Finding a space

There exists a significant and growing literature from Indigenous and some non-Indigenous academics criticising research as it has traditionally been conducted. Smith (1999) links research inextricably with imperialism and colonialism. Moreton-Robinson (2000) argues that white feminist researchers have misrepresented Indigenous women by unproblematically

including them in the category of 'women' without respecting important differences between the subject positions of Indigenous women and white women. Huggins and Saunders (1993) claim that white anthropologists appropriate Indigenous knowledge without acknowledgment or respect. In short, a strong and growing contingent of scholars not only critique the way that research has been conducted in the past and present, but are resisting the ways that we have traditionally collected and disseminated knowledge in the academy. These academics are calling for different research practices to be developed. They argue for decolonising methodologies which shift power relationships in favour of Indigenous research participants. This requires proper acknowledgment and respect for Indigenous knowledge and developing projects that benefit Indigenous individuals and communities. These strategies, they claim, need to be embedded in every aspect and at every stage of the research process (Smith, 1999).

Needless to say, this attitude to research often makes some people justifiably suspicious of researchers and research generally and means that research in Indigenous contexts is becoming more and more difficult to justify and initiate. Suspicion of research practices and outputs is nowhere more prevalent than in Indigenous units in western academies. It was just such a site where, very shortly after my appointment to a position as lecturer in Indigenous Studies, I was asked to conduct research on assessment.

I am a white woman anthropologist. I had just completed twelve years research with an urban Aboriginal community and I had taught in a casual capacity over some of that time in the department where I now work full-time. Because of this experience I was not naive to local Aboriginal politics or the politics of the department and its problematic positioning as part of a western academy. In other words, I did not expect my research into assessment to be automatically embraced. I knew that I needed to justify the research, design it so that it was acceptable as an example of decolonising methodology, and draw on past relationships and develop those relationships in a new research context.

The Leadership and Assessment Project (forthwith referred to as LEAP, after Leaders in Effective Practice, the descriptor for participants) is an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) funded internal Macquarie University research project, which uses Participatory Action Research (PAR) to research, review and improve assessment practices. My role, as an Action Research Enabler (ARE), was to implement and lead the project in my department. PAR, according to Carr and Kemmis, (1986, p.162) is a form of self reflexive, systematic and critical enquiry undertaken by participants who are simultaneously members of the community they are researching. Its aim, as Burns (cited in Cornwell 1999) insists, is 'to identify problematic situations or issues considered by participants to be worthy of investigation in order to bring about critically informed changes in practice'. It produces knowledge and action that are directly useful to the people involved in the research (Reason 1998, p.271) and imbues participants with ownership of the change that arises from the research. It is profoundly democratic, empowering people through the construction, development and use of their knowledge. A great strength of PAR, is that different paradigms of research can be adapted to its use, any methodology and many different combinations of methodologies can be used. These characteristics make PAR an ideal framework for developing decolonising research methodologies. I adopted a critical theory approach to my PAR research design which further enhanced the decolonising aspects of the research. This was done by focussing on empowering participants in the social situation of the research, transforming the social situation of the department and supporting a self-conscious critique of practices based on awareness of ideological and epistemological assumptions that shape the

social world of the department. It also encouraged an awareness of participants', including my own, subjective, inter-subjective and normative frames of reference (Burns, 1999).

Getting the research going

I began the research by collecting copies of all outlines of the units of study offered by the department. This action, 'kick started' the process of identifying problematic situations and to reflect on the rationality and justice of our research community's practices. To begin with, as was common in many of the departments participating in the research, no unit outlines were 'publicly' available at that time. There was no repository for all past and current unit outlines. This fact reflected what was revealed to be, at that time, a general attitude of defensiveness, possessiveness and atomism that had developed within the department. When I approached individual unit convenors to explain the research and ask for copies of outlines of the units they managed, many did not want to engage in a conversation on assessment. In one case, for example, I was told that I should realise that I was colluding in an attempt by the university to maintain surveillance over the department.

This kind of response was not, however, confined to the Indigenous unit. Others in my LEAP group reported a similar response from colleagues in their departments. At this stage of the research that argument was difficult to refute. Until an appropriately decolonising methodology was successfully developed and implemented, corporate university colonisation of the department could, indeed, be considered a potential effect of the research. I was supported throughout the project by a multi-level leadership group who participated in the action research process. This group of peers from all levels of the university management designed and implemented the assessment audit at the departmental level. This model of distributed leadership highlighted leadership as an 'emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals (Bennett, Wise, Woods and Harvey, 2003, p.7). This allowed us to 'pool (our) initiative and expertise' (ibid.) in a supported process, producing outcomes that are greater than we could have achieved as individuals. My colleagues on the LEAP team advised and supported me in using some of these same leadership strategies at the departmental level. It was suggested by the LEAP team that I avoid further alienation in the department and begin working on reviewing and improving unit outlines for which I was the convenor.

The review process entailed collecting unit outlines and mapping the types, weighting and frequency of assessment tasks and creating a matrix which provided data at a glance. Closer attention to the unit outlines revealed a duplication of tasks across the different units, an over representation of essays, and a large weighting of a final essay. Even more troubling was the prevalence of unassessed learning outcomes and un-aligned learning outcomes and assessment tasks. I then set to work aligning learning outcomes with assessment criteria and unit content (Biggs, 1999; Entwistle 1987), implementing more varied and innovative assessment using new technologies (Alexander, O'Reilly, Sweeney and McAllister 2001; Boud and Prosser 2002; Brown 2005; Campbell 2005) and developing marking rubrics to improve feedback to students. I initially did this with the help and support of one colleague in the department who was able to then engage in learning and teaching conversations both formally and informally in the department. This had the effect of disseminating at the departmental level, what we had learnt and continued to learn about assessment and quality teaching and learning. Gradually, through interaction, conversation, and dissemination of literature some staff began to talk more with each other about assessment and to share ideas and strategies. Eventually five members of staff including myself attended a foundations course in learning and teaching run by the university, which extended the range of our

developing knowledge and supported the processes we had begun to implement. Leadership for effective assessment was being distributed and staff adapted the model of evidence based, reflexive research that the LEAP team had disseminated to us and addressed issues that concerned them for their own benefit and the benefit of their students. Staff worked to collegially support and peer review each other's units and to take ownership, not only for the units for which they were responsible, but for other units for which the department was responsible.

Since then, all unit outlines have been placed on the departmental share drive, all assessment tasks in all units of study for which the department is responsible have been mapped and eight out of sixteen units have been peer reviewed and significant improvements have been implemented. These improvements include significant re-writes of some unit outlines, aligning learning outcomes with assessment criteria and unit content, designing marking rubrics that help students align their work with marking criteria and provide them with clear feedback and the implementation of varied and innovative assessment tasks using new technologies for learning and teaching. An example of one of these tasks is an on-going research task implemented in one unit last semester. Students were provided with a hard copy reader containing essential texts, but were required to supplement the weekly readings with another article researched independently from the library's journal databases. The reading needed to be relevant to the topic of the week, had to be correctly cited using Harvard referencing, and posted onto the unit's electronic 'Blackboard' site. The students also had to use both the reading they sourced themselves and the prescribed reading for that week to respond to a seminar question which was posted on the electronic discussion board. The same topic was verbally discussed during the weekly face-to-face seminar and tutors have reported that student engagement in seminars has improved visibly. Compared with units that do not use this assessment task, discussion is less directed by tutors, students support their arguments using the readings, and participation by students is lively. Students have fed back through the university's teaching evaluation survey (TEDS) that this task helped them to understand the themes of the unit, improved their research skills, and made learning more interesting.

A new work culture
Things have definitely changed in the department. As well as the LEAP project, we have a new Director who is passionate about learning and teaching and supports the initiatives of staff to review their own learning and teaching strategies and programs. When I first began this research only one year ago, there were virtually no conversations in staff meetings about learning and teaching. Today, not only do issues related to learning and teaching dominate staff meetings, but we also have scheduled regular meetings dedicated specifically to learning and teaching and research. As well as these formal approaches to discussing learning and teaching, it is currently common to overhear informal corridor discussions concerning learning and teaching. An example of this occurred recently when one of the staff members, who initially resisted participation in the project, asked if I would provide a copy of the assessment matrix that I prepared at the beginning of the research. The matrix, which graphically maps all assessment tasks in all units, their type, frequency and weighting is now used by this staff member to review the coming semester's assessment tasks. This reflects an enormous cultural change in the department.
The change of attitude that is indicated by the example above, however, is characteristic of a more profound cultural shift. This, I argue, is more than a change of culture, it is the genesis of a new culture. Cultural emergence depends primarily on a group of people sharing ideas about themselves as 'a people' (Blu, 1989,p. 2; Roosens, 1989, p.96), the collective desire of a group to be a 'we'. I would argue that one year ago, there was no such desire to be a 'we' in

the department. People were operating in competing and individualised modes which perpetuated an environment of suspicion and silenced communication. Barth (1969, p.13) is talking about ethnic cultural emergence when he says that what is crucial in understanding the formation of groups is the construction of social and cultural boundaries by the selective use of cultural attributes. I argue that this is also true of the emergence of a new culture of distributed leadership, support and improvement in our department. Barth argues that the creation of ethnic boundaries depends on the manipulation of cultural attributes, but the psycho-social aspect, the collective desire to be a group, cannot develop without some concrete foundations which are recognised by members of the group and by 'others' outside the group as characteristics of that group.

In the case of our department these concrete foundations cannot be sustained by ethnic identity because both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are members. It can only be sustained on the grounds of the intellectual heritage which we all share as academics. Through the training and support provided to me as Action Research Enabler vital knowledge and resources concerning learning and teaching were made available to the department. My initial leadership was distributed through the department and staff members appropriated the project to suit their own needs and to address their own issues. This was done with collegial support and interaction. Through the process of working together and communicating with each other, community members remembered that we shared a common intellectual heritage. As part of our common intellectual heritage we know that research is critically linked to teaching. As a group, we remembered that research was not only a hegemonic colonising practice, but could be used as a source of knowledge for all community members to benefit all of our students. Our continuing practice to improve learning and teaching serves as a constant reminder of the things we have in common and the grounds on which we are a community. This does not, of course, mean that unethical and damaging research practices need, or should be embraced, supported and reproduced, rather it means that the group share solidarity in meeting the demand for new, inclusive and decolonising methodologies in all contexts.

Conclusion

This paper represents some of the outcomes of an extraordinarily successful research project that has not only effected improving assessment in our department, but affected relationships between staff members as community members and produced something new. We now have a space where more of the issues in Indigenous education can begin to be spoken about.

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