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Connections through dis-identifications: The use of Cultural and Political Vignettes (CPVs) in teacher education

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Much has been written about the complexities involved in preparing pre-service teachers (PSTs) to take up the challenge of educating an increasingly diverse student population and, thus, enabling them to create connections and live productive lives in a world that is rapidly changing. However, there is a gap in the literature concerning PSTs that explores potential strategies and pedagogical approaches regarding the teaching and awareness of social inclusion issues for students in Higher Education and Secondary sectors.

In order to discuss these strategies and approaches I first turn to Diane Celia Hodges' (1998) notion of dis-identification as a framework from which the subject positions and contexts of teachers, students and situations can be examined. In this investigation, teaching practices that describe and work with difference can be constructed and analysed. Then, I look to Jacqueline Darvin's (2011) work concerning Cultural and Political Vignettes (CPVs) that I have used as a tool to open up space for PSTs to explore, analyse and act upon a number of interactions between bodies that may occupy socially, politically and culturally different positions.

While CPVs have originally been used in New York City public school classrooms, I have used them in courses at a regional Australian university. This paper is, then, a case study outlining some of the work I have done with CPVs in a setting that is very different to that of the original work. In this paper I continue the international discussion concerning CPVs and their effectiveness in forging student connections and working with issues of social inclusion.

Keywords: Cultural Political Vignettes, Social Inclusion, Pre-Service Teacher education

In the contemporary landscape of higher education Australian institutions are expected to be inclusive of a range of people from under-represented backgrounds. Through initiatives like the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) established in 2010, the Australian Government aims to increase the participation rates of students from lower socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds to twenty per cent of higher education undergraduate places by 2020 (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2012). While this is a move towards greater equity in student participation in higher education it also raises complex issues concerning the ways in which these students are supported so that they can achieve their education goals in the tertiary sector. It is also noted that similar issues concerning access and retention rates of students from under-represented backgrounds are prevalent in regional universities (Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2004). In this environment participation from under-represented student populations is encouraged yet the complexity of the issues involved in this situation have yet to be fully investigated. Regarding these issues, two concerns stand out as needing urgent critical attention in the field of educating pre-service teachers (PSTs). First, how do we provide high quality education to an increasingly diverse student population? And secondly, how do we provide PSTs with the knowledge and skills to enable them to successfully educate diverse student populations in primary and secondary schools?

As educators of future teachers we are constantly under pressure from a variety of institutional, social and political sources to prepare PSTs to successfully take up the challenge of educating a diverse student population to live productive and full lives in an increasingly complex and technologically-changing world. To achieve this goal contemporary research places at the centre of learning and teaching practice student-teacher relationships, student-centred learning, engagement and connection on personal, social and community levels. Much has been written about the importance of these issues of social inclusion in student education (Blackmore, 2009; Campbell & Whitty, 2002; Nieto, 1999; Smyth & McInerney, 2007; and Smyth & McInerney, 2009). There is also a great deal of literature focusing on the difficulties entailed in working with student diversity and the issues that this raises within the area of teacher education (Blackmore, 2009; Shor, 1992; Sleeter, 2001; Smyth & McInerney, 2007; and Smyth & McInerney, 2009). However, there is a lack of material that discusses possible strategies and pedagogical approaches that educators working in universities could use to enable PSTs to effectively work with a wide range of students in schools. In order to further examine these issues I turn to the work of two theorists working in the field of social inclusion in education. First, Diane Celia Hodges' (1998) concept of dis-identification is useful to my project as it offers a framework from which the actions, comments and work of bodies located within and also those standing outside mainstream culture can be interrogated. In the process of this interrogation, teaching practices that account for and work with difference can be constructed and analysed. Then, I turn to theorist and educator, Jacqueline Darwin's (2011) work concerning Cultural and Political Vignettes (CPVs) that I have used as a tool to open up space for PSTs to explore, analyse and act upon a number of interactions between bodies that may occupy socially, politically and culturally different positions.

Originally this pedagogical strategy was designed as a means for teachers in diverse learning environments to deal effectively with the sometimes competing needs for students to be educated in a world increasingly subject to the forces of technological advancement and globalisation as well as ensuring that issues of social justice and social inclusion are explored. I am using this pedagogical strategy in the context of an Australian regional university within what I term an enfolded practice. In this teaching approach I use CPVs to place different scenarios before the PSTs. When the PSTs have completed an initial investigation of the topic I introduce relevant contemporary literature that they read individually or in groups. This step in the process often opens up fresh perspectives and assists PSTs to formulate new strategies and approaches to teaching. Thus, the PSTs' teaching practices become enfolded by theory, analysis and action. Enfolded practice enables PSTs to have intellectual and, sometimes, physical space to develop considered responses to a range of issues. The connections PSTs make between theory and practice during these CPVs enable them to create strategies and learning experiences that are useful when teaching diverse student populations. Thus, the formation of these connections supports the successful fleshing out of rich and engaging teaching approaches that deal with difference.

My teaching work using CPVs has been carried out in the Bachelor of Education (BED), Bachelor of Arts/ Bachelor of Education (BA/BED) and Bachelor of Physical Education (BPhysEd) Programs. I have used CPVs with students at every year level of undergraduate degrees in the fields of education and physical education at the University of Ballarat (UB), a regional university located near the urban centre of the city of Melbourne. The diverse UB student population incorporates a mix of cultures, religious beliefs and practices as well as racial and ethnic backgrounds (Walker, 2011). However, the students I teach at UB are chiefly from

Judeo-Christian, Anglo-Australian rural/regional backgrounds. Being located in a rural area, students also may be affected by a cluster of - sometimes interrelated - issues which include cultural and social isolation, a lack of resources, non-academic backgrounds and low social and educational expectations. A variety of orientation and transition programs are offered to first year students at UB in order to deal with the previously mentioned concerns. Among these programs are the first year information sessions and activities routinely offered to this cohort of students as well as a transition program, Foundation Access Program (FAST) that assists students with their research, writing and general academic skills. While UB has sought to deal with the raft of issues associated with rural contexts by instigating these programs, I argue that more strategies are needed within course content, curricula and implementation of programs.

Much has been written about the need for PSTs to have their core assumptions concerning cultures, beliefs and behaviours challenged, as well as being given opportunities to construct nuanced accounts of a diverse range of situations (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Darwin, 2011; and, Hoffman & Pearson, 2000). These theorists and practitioners also argue that this kind of educative practice is rarely conducted in universities as teaching training courses tend to focus on the development of technical skills such as sequencing lessons in courses and effective presentation skills. Even when a teacher training course challenges beliefs and assumptions, according to the previously mentioned theorists, it is not particularly effective, as testified to in the expressions of surprise and sometimes disenchantment given by new teachers (Darwin, 2011). To address these issues I have turned to the use of CPVs in my own teaching.

As this is the first phase of research in this area, my data is gathered from the PSTs taking the courses I have coordinated and lectured at UB. In order to obtain information about how helpful my use of CPVs is to PSTs I have used data gathered from students as feedback. Mobilising strategies used by a colleague, I have used and adapted freewrites (writing for a set period of time with free expression) and critical incident questionnaires as well as general discussion to gather information about what PSTs feel and think about the use of CPVs in university and secondary school learning environments. Working with students from every year level of undergraduate degrees in BED, BA/BED and Phys Ed programs, I have used the written and verbal student feedback as well as class notes I have kept over the last two years of my teaching at UB as the basis for this article. Written feedback has been anonymous and verbal feedback recorded without names attached. These measures have effectively dealt with ethical issues concerning potential responses from the lecturer who also marks the students' work. It has also enabled the collection of honest student reactions to the CPVs. In lectures and tutorials I have discussed with students the research that I am undertaking and how their comments will assist this process. The students have been supportive of this, generally commenting that the research would be helpful to PSTs in other regional universities. In addition, dialogue with my colleagues and team teaching practices have enabled me to gain feedback regarding the use of CPVs in teacher training courses. I have regularly kept written records of these remarks.

Now I turn to Hodges' notion of dis-identification in order to interrogate the ways in which identity, participation and relations of power intersect and impact on the involvement of PSTs in course work focusing on diversity. Hodges' sociocultural analysis of student and teacher participation levels in conventional education systems highlights the moments where normative practice and bodies situated outside convention meet and sometimes collide. For Hodges, a person's participation in a learning experience becomes problematic when the participant is ostensibly engaged in the activity in a productive way and yet s/he experiences conflict and does not identify with the practice. In this dislocation between active involvement and identification with accepted practice and community, a person could experience a changing or shifting sense of "belonging".

This “shift” can be characterised as dis-identification, in that a person may be rejecting the identity connected with the practice, and yet is re-constructing an identification within the context of conflict and exclusion. This is where we might begin to acknowledge that we are not born with complex identities, but rather that we become “multiplied” through ongoing sociality. (Hodges, 1998)

Thus, dis-identification marks meetings of normative approach and difference where there is a breach between participation and the experience of belonging to communities of practice. I argue that the identification, description and analysis of instances of dis-identification are important aspects of teaching practice as they enable PSTs to examine their own subject positions as well as those of the students they teach. The interrogation of moments of dis-identification discloses valuable information concerning the places of rupture between conventional practice and “multiplied” identities that partially occupy the margins of normative practice. This triple process also allows PSTs to develop considered responses so that the issues raised in the moment of dis-identification can be addressed.

In order to find ways to bridge the fissures between normative practice and multiple situated identities I have made use of CPVs – opportunities to explore a variety of sometimes controversial issues concerned with intersections of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and school culture. Darwin writes that “CPVs are mock cultural and political situations that are presented to teachers so that they can practice the complex decision-making skills that they need to use in ... diverse classrooms” (Darvin, 2011, p. 346). These situated scenarios or situated performances go beyond role play activities as they are constructed so that PSTs have the space to reflect upon, analyse and discuss their experience. Finders and Rose (1999) describe a situated performance as a postmodern take on the strategy of role play. While CPVs contain a kernel of role play, the enfolded practice of theory and activity enables participants to assume different, sometimes contradictory subject positions. The CPVs allow PSTs space to reflect on their own subject positions, assumptions and actions concerning a wide range of educational, political, cultural and school-based issues. In addition, CPVs encourage PSTs to reflect on their teaching approaches and also to develop a variety of activities and learning experiences for their own classrooms.

In a similar vein to Darwin’s classification of four levels of CPVs, I have used five levels of CPVs in university learning environments. The first category involved student-created CPVs where, after discussion, students have responded in writing to a core issue from the course or a concern raised by fellow students. The second type of CPV was also student-initiated but it involved a performance-based rather than written response. Next, in the third category of CPV topics were put forward by the lecturer and students responded with presentations and/or in discussions. The fourth style of CPV entailed lecturer-generated focus issues and student response was in the form of situated performances. Lastly, the fifth kind of CPV exemplified enfolded practice. This type of CPV involved situated performances, discussion and analysis. After further reading on the topic, the knowledge gained was included or folded in to a reworking of the CPV scenario. Extended discussion and analysis of the situated performance located various moments of dis-identification and suggested strategies, skills or the acquisition of more knowledge that could assist PSTs in dealing effectively with the focus issues.

Before the CPV took place, the PSTs noted any potential concerns that they felt might arise and discussed possible ways of dealing with these issues. After the CPV, the PSTs reflected upon and analysed their experiences then entered in to dialogue with their peers in which their own

values, beliefs and teaching philosophies were discussed. Literature relevant to the topic at hand was continually folded in to the process from my own contributions and also from students who were especially interested in particular topics. Discussions concerning contemporary theory and resources were also enabled by online debates in Professional Reading Forums I set up as part of course Moodle sites.

Student-created CPVs were usually debated, written and performed in response to “solutions” to an issue given by the lecturer. For example, when given the situation – “A student is suspended for assaulting another student” PSTs were invited to respond by creating CPVs that addressed a variety of contexts and situated subjectivities. In general, student-created CPVs often focused on tensions between different cultures and belief-systems; gender issues; and, the imagined threat of “Bogans” (a derogatory term for a particular working class demographic) in school environments. Following the CPVs concerned with the previous example of the student suspension, discussion was focused on issues concerning white western working-class behaviours and hegemonic masculinity. PSTs commented that suspension was a harsh but necessary measure and that the school needed a strong discipline plan to “make sure they deal with the rough stuff even though boys will fight”.

The next step in this process of enfolded practice involved the folding in of relevant literature around the action of the CPVs. After taking part in reading circles that focused on excerpts from Raewyn Connell and colleague’s (2010) work on class, gender and society, the PSTs then entered into further dialogue and examined the assumptions they had brought to their CPVs. At this juncture, moments of dis-identification opened up space to investigate personally held conventional narratives. Some students dismissed Connell et al.’s nuanced accounts of classed and gendered bodies, preferring to retain their traditional notions of working-class threats to middle-class norms and gender stereotypes. However, a significant number of the PSTs seized on the moment of dis-identification they experienced within the CPV to analyse their own gendered and classed position. One PST stated “I went to a private school so it wasn’t like that. But if you live in that environment I guess it would be hard to break out of it.” The students who identified as outside normative narratives of class and gender used their own moments of dis-identification as springboards for the development of teaching approaches that take into account a variety of gendered and classed subject positions. “I was a scholarship girl!” a PST remarked, “I would never put my children in that position ... Its important to think about things like SES background because it affects how students learn.” Another PST stated, “Girls can be just as rough as boys, you need to watch them too.”

While the PSTs often enjoyed creating their own CPVs, even though they found the analysis of their assumptions to be confronting, they generally expressed a preference for creating scenarios from a teacher-derived source. For instance, one of the scenarios I have used with PSTs is as follows:

Bonnie, a fourteen year old girl has been placed on a “Behaviour card” that she must carry to every class and ensure that the teacher signs it if her behaviour is considered to be of an appropriate standard. She assaulted a male student in her class who also comes from the same cultural and language background. Bonnie said that he had been teasing and harassing her. She also states that she told a male teacher about the situation and he did not assist in the resolution of the incidents. In general, the female student feels like the male teacher and students are “ganging up on her” and she refuses to “take it anymore”.

Discuss, write and perform two short scenes that sum up the cultural and gender issues in this case.

When this CPV example was used in tutorials, students identified, discussed and acted out a number of events infused with concepts of hegemonic masculinity, conventional notions of femininity, and assumptions about cultural difference. Sometimes these conventional viewpoints were overturned. Discussions about the point of dis-identification of the student that led to the incident often focused on the rupture of faith in the authority of teachers caused by the teacher's inability to resolve the situation to the satisfaction of the female student. At this juncture, hegemonic masculinity and narratives of cultural diversity became a central focus across generations and positions of power. PSTs often mentioned increasing instances of female instigated violence reported anecdotally and in news media. As part of the enfolded practice I use with CPVs the PSTs then read Cooper and Iles' (2010) work on gender and diversity. From this activity discussions included the examination of localised cultural stereotypes such as the shiftless Aborigine and the Middle Eastern violent and repressive male accompanied by the acquiescent female. One PST acknowledged "Its so hard to talk about race. We're all scared we'll do the wrong thing or say something that upsets everyone." This comment led to a discussion around the strategies and local community resources that could be used to assist a teacher working with gender issues as well as cultural and ethnic diversity.

Initially, a significant number of the PSTs I have worked with have been somewhat reluctant to engage with the CPV process, in particular the aspects that challenge established thinking and behaviours that hold considerable weight in the local community. Some students also found it difficult at times to assume a persona and, in character, explore a confrontational situation. It needs to be noted that CPVs were only attempted after several weeks of lectures and tutorials in which we engaged in considerable discussion about a range of topics including values education, the importance of school – community links, positive learning environments, and diversity in contemporary classrooms. Warm-up and drama games also assisted in forging connections between students and in creating open, respectful and safe learning environments. Some students, however, did not ever overcome their initial difficulties in participating in the CPVs. Their dis-identification with the situated positions of a number of the "characters" in the CPVs emphasized their own entanglement within narratives of convention. However, these students usually wrote about their experiences rather than taking active roles in the CPVs. Written expression was perceived by these students to be less confronting than the physical participation of the CPVs.

After the initial reluctance to take part in the CPVs, however, the majority of PSTs appeared to enjoy the experience and found it to be useful preparation for their work in schools. Some students commented that they found it liberating to be able to take on a subject position that was slightly or, sometimes, completely different to their own situation. There was a sense that the CPVs enabled a brief but believable glimpse in to the life of a person who lived such a different life to the student acting out the "character" and, as such, allowed the pleasure of "trying on" a range of situated positions and circumstances. This is similar, in a way, to the pleasure that computer gamers experience in constructing avatars or different online personas. The adoption of a variety of positions, however brief, enabled students to find moments of dis-identification in which they could target the elements and issues that contributed to the problematic of the CPV.

After readings had opened up new possibilities for thinking about and dealing with a range of issues, the analysis component of the enfolded practice offered potential solutions to the concerns expressed. PSTs were quick to offer suggestions about a number of ways in which incidents could be dealt with and, how language could be used effectively and accurately in these situations. A considerable number of these solutions involved the development of student-

teacher relationships and cultural awareness training and/or research. From this new knowledge and awareness, the next stage in dealing with the problematic of a variety of CPVs was to transpose these findings to the curriculum about to be taught. Some solutions to the variety of issues raised included strategies such as teacher training in diversity and finding people of a particular culture/race/ethnicity in the wider community and bringing them in to the classroom to enable them to become part of the school community. The use of CPVs also emphasized the importance of ensuring that all teaching resources reflected a diversity of cultures, beliefs, language backgrounds and contexts. This was particularly important for PSTs who came from rural/regional backgrounds and did not have a great deal of experience in culturally diverse environments.

From the examples cited in this paper it can be noted that the enfolded practice I have developed from the framework consisting of the concept of dis-identification coupled with the use of CPVs provided useful ways of opening up space for PSTs to locate, describe, analyse and act upon a range of issues. The initial moment of dis-identification was promoted by the collision of personal narrative and situated scenario combined with performance, theory and analysis. This rupture between normative and difference became the springboard for extended investigations of multiple subject positions. These examinations of intersections of centre and margin were fuelled by theoretical writings exploring a range of topics. In this framework of dis-identifications, CPVs and the resulting analyses, enfolded practice permitted the acknowledgement of the lived experience of the individual which was then used as the basis for a scholarly interrogation of conventional narratives.

Even though my use of CPVs within an enfolded practice has, in some ways, underlined teaching practices that have been well documented, such as cultural awareness through school-community links and appropriate resources, it has also contributed to a conversation carried out across countries and cultures. From the initial use in the diverse environments of New York public schools I have transferred CPVs to a very different setting. I have used CPVs in the education of Pre-Service Teachers in the higher education sector at a regional university in Australia. From the positive responses of the PSTs involved with the development of CPVs, I argue that this enfolded practice is transferable to other education programs in both regional and urban centres in Australia as it provides a framework to identify and work with issues regarding social inclusion and diversity at local and national levels. This notion of enfolded practice and the use of CPVs could also contribute towards providing a high quality education for PSTs in other Australian universities as it achieves what educators strive to attain in forging meaningful connections between theory and practice in engaging and useful ways. As one PST stated: "Now I get why you make us read all that stuff for all those years. It helps and it changes things." These connections form a strong platform upon which we can construct high quality learning experiences and support that enable student success in pre-service teacher education programs.

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