

Writing the value(s) of colonised equity practices in higher education

Matt Lumb*, University of Newcastle, Australia

Louis Ndagijimana, University of Newcastle, Australia

To cite this article:

Lumb, M & Ndagijimana, L 2021, 'Writing the value(s) of colonised equity practices in higher education', *Access: Critical explorations of equity in higher education*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 41–56.

*matt.lumb@newcastle.edu.au

Abstract

The reasons promoted for investments in processes of widening participation in higher education are commonly couched in a language of equity, albeit a conceptualisation of equity imbued with notions of social mobility and/or employability. Methodological considerations of equity-oriented research and how these shape knowledges about equity, or indeed the ways in which 'the problem' of equity is constructed, is a matter of some ongoing debate. Less prominent across the field of equity and widening participation are discussions concerning methodologies in relation to the approaches to practice taken up in higher education to, for example, create more inclusive environments or more transformative possibilities as the case might be in different contexts.

In this article we tentatively explore how the terms and concepts higher education staff adopt to imagine and implement approaches to 'equity practice' in higher education are shaped by the language systems available to us. We do so by co-authoring a paper that attempts to 'dig into' a recent interaction between two colleagues at an Australian university; an arguably dialogic moment in which a term drawn from a language other than English available to one of the colleagues created a new articulation of approach of perceived value to both of us. This articulation of approach to practice is then juxtaposed with a social imaginary that demands forms of accountability that legitimises instrumental programs logics and tend towards policy short-termism, exalting certain types of evaluation to effectively undermine efforts that hold ethical, unstable, generative, uncertain commitments at their core.

The article is also an effort to foreground the enduring histories of colonisations and how these continually shape our contexts and our practices in higher education.

Keywords: language, culture, praxis, colonisation, evaluation

Is one way that social reality, capital, class difference, relations of subordination and exclusion come to seem natural and familiar precisely through the language that impounds these notions in a subtle and daily way into our sense of reality? (Butler 2003, p. 203)

the rhetoric of power all too easily produces an illusion of benevolence when deployed in an imperial setting, [...] used [...] with deafeningly repetitive frequency in the modern period, by the British, the French, the Belgians, the Japanese, the Russians, and now the Americans. (Said 1993, p. xix)

Commencements

Louis: *For me, the student gatherings are linked to language and justice. The people we support, they utilise different languages. And when they communicate in their languages, they become familiar, they build belonging and social connections among themselves and then among other local communities and even the university. What we are talking about here is inclusion, exclusion, discrimination, participation, representation, recognition. It is all intertwined – weaving each other. Allowing language capability into a space, it is capacity building for a particular community where there are oppressions that prevent them from using their own ways of integrating with a space.*

Matt: *Perhaps that could be a focus for this paper then Louis? Trying to grasp these sorts of presences in processes of ‘widening participation’? And how language produces realities? Trying to situate our practice, including the horrific aspects of the everyday, the taken for granted action that carries the inclusion, exclusion, discrimination, racism, representation, recognition. And maybe, how different colonisations have and continue to produce these? Trying to write about what is present when you do what you do. When I do what I do. Not that we can be totally ‘aware’ but as a sort of responsibility to try and remember?*

Our (Louis and Matt) intent with this paper is partly captured in our recorded interaction above. We attempt in these pages to identify and convey aspects of our context in higher education, aspects that we argue can easily be forgotten. Specifically, the work is an effort between colleagues to remind ourselves of the enduring histories of colonisations – perhaps the most ‘undiscussable’ parts of our everyday interactions – and how these histories continually shape us. We have this stated intention, yet we are sensitive to the idea that in acts of communication, ‘intention doesn’t govern’ (Butler 2003, p.204). We assume that readers are already remaking our sayings here, in flights that we will never know. Our intention is therefore precarious and uncertain, tentatively offered as a vehicle for possible frustration, confusion, growth and expansion.

We have co-authored this paper attempting to ‘dig into’ a recent interaction between us. In a regular meeting, one of us (Louis) reached for the term *bourgeon* to articulate an approach to an activity on campus, and the term was immediately perceived as of some new value to us both. Specifically, we were discussing how to begin to evaluate the approach Louis was taking to a series of structured social gatherings as part of efforts with students from refugee and refugee-like backgrounds to navigate university study. A crude translation from French to English has *bourgeon* meaning something akin to a bud or sprout, holding the shoots of a plant with yet to

be developed leaves and/or flower(s). This initial interaction between us led to ongoing conversations on the topic, drawing new articulations from the interpretations we were making around this new term, this new tool and the possibilities we felt it held. We began to discuss how the term helped us to think about unknown multiplicities, new worlds, creative growth and flourishing. We enjoyed how this seemed to escape some of the more functional or cause-and-effect understandings of the initiatives in which we were involved. We began to record discussions as we could sense the dialogue taking directions neither of us understood but were interested to explore more deliberately.

When this special issue was proposed, we began to read together articles we felt were related to our discussions. We were trying to identify something we didn't yet grasp. We had hoped of course to publish in this paper some grand insights. What has emerged is more to do with a process of placing ourselves in histories. For, in this effort to locate our work, we have come to know each other as colleagues in new ways. The development of the paper has become a new space for us in trying to read and write and say together. This is a messy mix of the personal, interpersonal, and political; a mix guided however by the theoretical/conceptual framework of the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) to which we both belong. The influences weaving the work draw largely from feminist, decolonising and post/structural thinking and projects. For example, we claim to draw on feminist commitments (in close concert with 'critical' and 'post/structural' theories) that help to consider the embodied subjectivities and practices involved, bringing attention to the ways inequalities are experienced and felt through complex formations of personhood (Burke 2012).

CEEHE is a centre that attempts to bring research and practice together in critical thought, gathering around attempts to address persistent inequalities and 'generate transformative impact for equity in and beyond higher education' (CEEHE 2021, np). In this context, the development of personal and shared praxis (Van Rensburg 2006) is deeply valued, whether it be within projects of research or practice or deliberate blending of these two. CEEHE is also a place where the focus of research/practice/praxis is not always fixed on individuals or groups positioned as 'in need' or 'vulnerable'. Rather, held in focus also are the relatively privileged agents in these relations of doing equity in higher education. These are the practitioners, researchers and senior staff guiding the methodologies of equity and widening participation as part of university institutions with long histories of exclusion and forms of violence. This focus is important because these agents (and we count ourselves amongst these) carry in their being, knowing and doing the very gendered, classed and racialised inequalities that projects of social justice in education seek to engage and disrupt. In this project, CEEHE follows Burke (2012) by taking up Nancy Fraser's conceptualisation of social justice (Fraser, 1997, 2003), holding this together with insights from the critical, feminist, and post/structural perspectives referred to earlier.

In this context, we have wrestled with the challenge of writing together. For example, is it inevitable that one author's voice will dominate as another is slowly silenced? In the next section we begin to try to foreground aspects of our positionalities, including how they are linked to classed, raced and language-based relations of power. Certainly, the irony of writing this work in English is not lost on us. As a way of working through these problems, we have noted that, as socially situated subjects, our writing is not necessarily 'our own' but produced through existence in social fields. For this special issue then, we would note that such issues:

are central to concerns about access, both in terms of accessing different forms of knowledge, some which are given greater social value and legitimacy than others, and in terms of accessing the processes by which a

subject may be recognised as an author, as having authority within the field of higher education. (Burke 2012, p. 83)

These are concerns from which we perhaps cannot or should not always shy away. And they are concerns that this special issue seeks to address. We want to write together, for many reasons, but at least one of these reasons being to offer perspectives from those who:

inhabit the margins of academia or are excluded from its realm is an important political and scientific project. Crucially, the view from the margins also sheds light on the power relationships and norms which operate at the core of academia. (Moreau 2017, p. 9)

We begin the paper by partially locating ourselves and the contexts of our work, including some of the problematic aspects of the widening participation methodologies in which we are involved. We then identify specific colonisations and their effects, with a focus on language as an aspect of imperialism. We move to critique hegemonic evaluation culture, which resembles both the problematic aspects of widening participation and new colonisations. We do so because this paper stemmed from a discussion where Louis reached beyond the everyday language of program logic for a term that he felt better able to represent an approach and intended impact. We close with reflections on what we co-authors might tentatively claim to have become, learned and unlearned (Datta 2018).

Introducing our contexts of learning and unlearning

Louis: *What I do over there is for them to see me acting as one of their cohort. Sharing my experience and hearing from me using broken English but doing my job. I think it is important. They will feel represented. They will feel that they are recognised, regardless of what the main society think of them. A longer-term outcome is the network we form as we try to wipe away those empty feelings. Instead, enhancing and exploring their capability and the future, and the person – the human being valued within a place.*

Matt: *That's interesting Louis. Given you are so familiar with that experience of having to navigate yourself the dominate language practice here being English, to think about what is it that you do in the student gatherings that you think helps the participants.*

We locate ourselves here professionally in a context of Equity and Widening Participation in university higher education. The idea of 'Widening Participation' – as a series of policies, funding schemes and programmatic activity – has become an increasing focus within many higher education systems across the globe. The reasons given for investments in processes of Widening Participation are often presented in a language of equity but with a close association with ideas such as 'social mobility' and/or 'employability' (Lumb & Bunn, 2021). Largely, the underlying imperative is guided by individual or national-level economic benefit. Often the focus of interventions stemming from this policy and funding are groups of students that have historically been underrepresented, or altogether excluded, in higher education. For example, in the Australian context from which we write, the official equity groups are Low Socioeconomic Status (Low SES), Disability, Indigenous, Women in Non-Traditional Areas (WINTA), Regional and Remote, and Non-English-Speaking Background (NESB). An immediate problem though, is the way in which processes of targeting have an effect of 'homogenizing those communities, for example, through policy categorizations ... [and] ... often perpetuates a

pathologising, neocolonial gaze while ignoring differences within as well as between communities' (Burke & Lumb 2018, p. 16).

There has been significant financial investment in these regimes in recent decades (for example, over 1 billion dollars in dedicated equity-oriented funding in the last decade in Australia). Yet what research from many different higher education systems has demonstrated is that:

While the 'success story' of expansion in higher education has led to a more diverse student body, it ironically has not produced a more inclusive higher education sector. Instead we find in the 'open' market place universities have become more polarised and segregated along hierarchical race and class lines. (Mirza 2018, p.8)

This paper is developed from a context in which the intended beneficiaries are students from refugee and refugee-like backgrounds, with Louis' work focused on working alongside students to navigate the perilous structures of higher education. The focus of the paper is not solely this 'equity group' or even a sustained investigation of an aspect of understanding or supporting educational journeys involved. Instead, we take this context as a point of departure to bring together questions of colonisation, refuge, language and evaluation as the paper develops. This is not to turn away from or to understate however the importance of universities working more and better with students from refugee backgrounds because, as Molla (2020) has shown, many community members from refugee backgrounds in Australia continue to face lingering challenges in the areas of educational attainment, employment, cultural adaptation and social engagement. Also drawing on Nancy Fraser's conceptualisation of social justice, Molla adopts the notion of *misframing* to demonstrate how higher education policy in Australia does not specifically engage the notion of refugee status and therefore creates structural impediments to the construction of support. A growing body of work in the Australian context is illuminating the situations, strategies and successes of this unofficial 'equity group' (for example, Naidoo 2018; Naylor 2019; Molla 2019 & 2020). Whilst the practices focus on developing new types of relational support for students from refugee backgrounds, the contribution this paper attempts to make is broader than this particular 'equity group', important as this focus might be. This paper elevates the attention to methodology of Equity and Widening Participation practice, in addition to approaches to research and evaluation that might relate to these contexts. Methodological considerations of equity-oriented research and how these shape knowledges *about* equity, or indeed the ways in which 'the problem' of equity is constructed, is a matter of some ongoing debate. Less prominent across the field of equity and widening participation are discussions concerning methodologies in relation to the approaches to practice taken up in higher education to, for example, create more inclusive environments or more transformative possibilities as the case might be in different contexts (Rainford 2021).

The activity Louis engages in as part of CEEHE is diverse and the processes of facilitating student gatherings is only one dimension of a networked, community-located strategic framework he has developed over time. The idea of gathering can be constructed as simple and 'natural', but also as complex and difficult. This paper emerged from a discussion together trying to produce something of a shared understanding across different positionalities (including language) of how we might understand and evaluate this aspect of Louis' work. As part of our praxis, a method we undertook was to share written reflections back and forth via email as we read and walked and talked together. At one point, we shared something of an autobiographical snapshot which we have decided to include here, inspired by feminist approaches to understanding work such as this paper as socially situated with knowledge formation being

contextual, political and relational.

Louis writes here about growing up in Burundi and moving, through forced migration, to Australia.

My name is Louis. I am an African-Australian, born and raised up in Burundi which is a country wedged in between Tanzania, the Republic Democratic of Congo (RDC) and Rwanda. I lived in a refugee camp in Tanzania for seven years and during that time I worked with refugees through different United Nations organisations including working at high school as a teacher for four years (from 2003 to 2007). When I arrived in Australia, education in English language and Australian ways of doing things challenged me. In terms of my education, I went to Technical and Further Education (TAFE) NSW for five years and I got three diplomas in community services sector (community services work, Mental Health and Case management). Afterwards I completed a Bachelor of Social Science degree at the University of Newcastle. Now I am working at University of Newcastle in Centre for Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) where I work with students from refugee or refugee-like backgrounds, helping them to navigate higher education. In 2021, I completed a Master of Social Change and Development. Being born in Burundi, which was colonised by Belgium, has impacted me psychologically and academically, my world views and my social positionality. It has shaped the ways the world thinks I am. A short history of Burundi is important for this work. The ethnic citizens of Burundi (Hutu, Tutsi and Twa peoples) lived in Burundi for at least 500 years, before the German chancellor Bismark gathered western powers in 1884 to agree how Africa would be controlled (Rosenberg, 2004). From this time, Germany occupied Burundi, until after the First World War when they were forced to give territory to Belgium.

Colonisation is an invading, an establishing of power over a space or occupant, a claiming of total ownership. It is like when a plant establishes itself in an area and previous plants disappear forever. Following the directions of colonisers, Burundi accepted without revendication French as the official language to be used in offices, schools, and health. Being born in a family/clan where education was denied, I had a strong dream and commitment to have French language and then be able to communicate with those situated among intellectuals, able to hear the language of colonisers. I grew up believing that getting to be recognised as a person of intellectual capability, you had to know western languages, especially French. I started learning French in year three of school, to advance an intellectual identity, a mark of someone who lines up with the 'civilised' world. Embracing French language capabilities meant being able to communicate with those who hold the earth in their hands. With colonisation, there is always superiority and the sense of subordinate or inferiority on the side of the colonised. Someone is up there; someone is down there. Having embraced French, I felt that that when using French, I am an international person, with knowledge, global knowledge. But then, in South Africa and when I came here to Australia, I couldn't use French to prove that I am somebody. Instead, I felt ashamed, empty. This the reason I took paths into education to shine again as a person of values and integrity.

And Matt writes here about growing up as a White male in a middle-class home in NSW.

My name is Matt. I grew up on beaches on the mid north coast of NSW in Australia. My feelings of belonging on beaches is of course an ongoing colonisation (of Gumbaynggir Country and of the Polynesian/Hawaiian practices of surfing). Raised as I was amongst sand dunes, each afternoon I trod carelessly on the hot remnants of shell middens and massacres to ride waves in the boisterous manner expected of exulted White male bodies in surfing sub-cultures, one that

tends to thrive often on ‘the attempted domination of nature, and the domination of woman “as nature”’ (Salleh 1997, p. 12).

As a young boy though I was quite scared of the ocean. Growing up on the coast, this is not acceptable. The most legitimate masculinities involve Whiteness, surfing large and dangerous waves, tanned muscled skin and blonde hair, a girlfriend waiting dutifully on the sand. To overcome this, I took on partially something of a waterman discourse in certain social circles, a way of being that facilitated the proper performance of a body in place. My parents I have always considered quite progressive, yet they bought land on the side of a hill nearby and named it in a local Aboriginal language. The problem of ownership and thin recognition/cultural appropriation is mostly part of the unspeakable contemporary Australia – one of the ways we sustain the constitutional invisibility of Australia’s First Peoples.

This safe, middle-class upbringing set me up well to join the symbolically violent work of university outreach, producing programs built on problematic assumptions, confused and dazed by a policy and funding environment coercing Widening Participation practitioners to target fellow community members based on some assumed deficit of, for example, aspiration. It is these assumptions that come to matter. The constructions of the Other that legitimate the intervention. The unethical separateness that limits our response-abilities, the possibility of being in common. I entered this fray from a professional teaching and community work background, with perhaps an empathetic yet uncritical set of dispositions. This is what has led me to worrying a lot about evaluation and how hegemonic value systems corrupt these processes from their inception.

Sharing writing in this way has enriched the deliberate sessions of dialogue we have adopted over the course of developing this paper. We have not approached the work explicitly positioning ourselves as doing ‘decolonising’ theoretical/practical work. We have however taken some guidance and inspiration from the possibility that Datta (2018) outlines in terms of a decolonising approach being a deliberate and on-going process of becoming, unlearning and relearning. The praxis we have attempted to produce is one that remembers how the institutions and legacies of various colonialisms remain. The idea of ‘decolonising higher education’ has become an increasing focus in recent times (for example, Luckett, Hayes & Stein 2020) with, as Tuhiwai Smith (1999) notes writing from the Aotearoa New Zealand context, the term having taken on different meanings in time and in different contexts:

Decolonization, once viewed as the formal process of handing over the instruments of government, is now recognized as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power. (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999, p. 98)

As stated earlier, our intent was develop ways to remember aspects of our context that hold the social reverberations of colonisations and bring these to the fore as a praxis. In this next section we briefly explore some of the ways that the English language has become such a hegemonic force through various imperial projects.

Embedding linguistic hegemony

For Butler, the concept of *hegemony* emphasises the ways ‘power operates to form our everyday understanding of social relations, and to orchestrate the ways in which we consent to (and reproduce) those tacit and covert relations of power’ (Butler, Laclau & Zizek 2000, p. 14). We share this paper from the settler colonial context of contemporary Australia. This is a context

where for example, in the early 1800s as part of efforts to ‘Civilise and Christianise’, an institute was created in Parramatta (Sydney) by Governor Lachlan Macquarie to indoctrinate the First Peoples of this country to European ways of knowing and learning (White, 2013). This is a contemporary context in which the Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison recently drew direct parallels between the suffering of first fleet colonists and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, suggesting it ‘wasn’t a particularly flash day’ either for those arriving on the tall ships from England. This dismissal of the ongoing historical injustices perpetrated on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through equating it with the trauma experienced by colonisers provides disturbing insight into the embedded racist frames of reference structuring contemporary Australian society.

As part of an effort to build for ourselves a partial history of the present, in this section we look briefly at how expansionist projects have helped to create the macro conditions in which gatherings with students from refugee backgrounds are located. This reading and discussing such histories was part of our ongoing effort to make the familiar strange, as a praxis that largely led to us getting to know each other differently as colleagues navigating discourses of equity in contemporary Australian higher education. A focus in this section is how English language particularly, as part of broader cultural imperialisms, has been used within deliberate projects of creating worlds and orders with significant and enduring consequences. For example, Phillipson (2008) writes of Winston Churchill receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature for *A history of the English-speaking peoples* prior to secretly meeting:

President Franklin Roosevelt to coordinate war strategy, and plan for the ensuing peace. He declared in the House of Commons on 24 August 1941: “...the British Empire and the United States who, fortunately for the progress of mankind, happen to speak the same language and very largely think the same thoughts...” (Morton 1943 cited in Phillipson 2008, p. 3)

These types of successful efforts at embedding linguistic supremacies continue to be guided by those with economic capital and military might (Harvey, 2003). Taking up the idea of linguistic capital, Phillipson (2008) describes below how English has also been an essential element in the recent missions of the contemporary American neoliberal project (Phillipson quotes here from ‘In praise of cultural imperialism?’ in *Foreign Policy*, by David Rothkopf and published by the Kissinger Institute in 1997):

It is in the economic and political interest of the United States to ensure that if the world is moving toward a common language, it be English; that if the world is moving toward common telecommunications, safety, and quality standards, they be American; and that if common values are being developed, they be values with which Americans are comfortable. These are not idle aspirations. English is linking the world.

In this paper, we do not have the room to pursue Gramsci (or his followers) in an elaborate analysis of how language and hegemony intertwine across local, national and global scales (Ives, 2004). We do want to recognise, though, that there are important explanations in these literatures of how language is one means by which the values and norms propagated through networks of power become accepted by citizens as common sense, providing legitimacy for those in positions of hierarchical power, helping to hold in place a status quo. We would certainly agree that English is not just a tool of communication. Indeed, ‘Language not only communicates to us about a ready-made world but gives us a world, and gives it to us, or indeed, withholds it from

us by virtue of the terms it uses' (Butler 2003, p. 203). The English language, for example, is part of value systems tied to social processes and identifications this language serves in a particular cultural context. Louis, in the interaction presented below, speaks to having to re/position himself constantly in a setting in which it has become utterly 'natural' to speak particular forms of English, in the settler colonial Commonwealth of Australia whose head of state is the Queen of England and in which there endures a constitutional invisibility of First Nations People, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

These are the aspects of histories we want to try and remember as an anti-hegemonic practice. We don't want to overclaim here, however, the significance of remembering the colonial backdrop of our practices in higher education. We don't boldly assert this claim to praxis emancipates us from hegemony. We do, however, want to contemplate and hold in our practices these backdrops. We do want to consider these problems in our ongoing valuations and co-constructions of formal evaluation, including program evaluation. We do so in the critical hope (Bozalek et al. 2014) that it might help us to resist and disrupt some of the worst effects of distributed power at play.

Matt: *Something else you talked about last time Louis, was, well, 'time'. You mentioned that if CEEHE operated in French you felt you would have done many more things. I'd be interested to talk about that again, in terms of language and inter-cultural work, and questions of justice.*

Louis: *I remember. In my position, diving into English language, I do double and triple things. I learn the language, the context, the meaning, and when to use terms, when is it appropriate. If I was using French, I would not have to wait so long each time to learn new jargon or I would not be so hesitant to contribute on an idea. Before I do something in English, I must process how to say it, how to position myself. However, I see that it was necessary for me to undergo these processes to understand someone in similar shoes as I am.*

We can be surprised what people are capable of. An example is me presenting at a local service where I meet people who are learning English but also have University qualifications from back home. When I tell them that I don't know enough English they laugh at me. And then they say, 'Tell us about your story'. So, I tell them that when I came here, I didn't know anything, I learned, from whatever TAFE (Technical and Further Education), whatever. Then they are assured they will reach a certain level where they can express themselves. Where they won't have fear to commit an error when they are communicating.

Having been on that journey myself, to meet someone on that journey, it is wonderful to understand one another. It builds trust between us.

We also want to acknowledge some of the volume of scholarship that holds a kinship to our own co-authored commitments to increasingly 'just' language arrangements in education. As we have noted earlier, Burke (2012) has translated Fraser's multidimensional conceptualisation of social justice to the contexts of higher education. Burke in this work also draws on McNay to highlight the strengths and limitations of Fraser's deployment of the concept to develop an interrogation of the politics of recognition as an ongoing dynamic operating across higher education contexts including pedagogical spaces. In an analysis of the (lack of) political economy of language education research, Block (2018) draws on the work of Nancy Fraser too, to examine whether a *translanguaging* approach is capable of 'transformation' of structural inequality in relation to language justice. Block first asks whether affirmative action can ever really attack the roots of inequality and injustice in societies and to eliminate them, recognising that:

In Fraser's view, it cannot and does not, and she proposes instead that actions taken in favour of recognition and redistribution need to be "transformative," providing "remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework". (Fraser 2008 cited in Block 2018, p. 244)

Translanguaging relates to resisting homogeneity, stability and boundedness as a set of starting assumptions with 'mobility, mixing, political dynamics and historical embedding [becoming the] concerns in the study of languages, language groups and communication (Blommaert & Rampton 2011, p. 3). Block maintains a critical position in relation to translanguaging literatures but also acknowledges that it has become an important lens for how researchers examine multilingual practices in and around education given that:

many scholars have begun to argue that it has transformative potential, that is, that the promotion of translanguaging may be key element in ongoing battles against inequality and injustice in contemporary multilingual and multicultural societies. (Block 2018, p. 250)

With more space we might continue to unpack the notion of translanguaging for our context, and we will continue to do so beyond the context of this paper. The field has appeal for developing pedagogical practice that can resist homogeneity and boundedness, to influence our current discussions on valuing diversity differently, including perhaps how to begin to sensitively and respectfully evaluate the approach taken to the student gatherings designed to support university students, as part of our project of producing a praxis by historicising our practices. In the next section we explore further the dimensions of this challenge: that of evaluating equity practice whilst holding an explicit recognition that the conditions surrounding it were formed by ongoing colonisations.

The challenge of evaluating an 'equity' formed by ongoing colonisations

This paper, this dialogue, emerged from a discussion regarding how a process of evaluation might commence by adopting the commitments and approach used to construct the social spaces of an initiative. This question of how evaluation intersects with projects of equity and social justice, particularly in contexts of formal education, is of interest to us and to CEEHE. Evaluation of equity and in higher education is a contested field of scholarship, policymaking and practice (Burke & Lumb 2018) in which processes can reinforce rather than challenge inequality (Gordon, Lumb, Bunn & Burke 2021). These contestations play out in what Lather (2007) describes as 'a worldwide audit culture with its governmental demands for evidence-based practice and the consequent (re)privileging of scientific methods' (p. 2). An aspect of our attempt to situate our practices was trying to take note of these demands for certain forms of accountability; demands that we argue work to legitimise instrumental programs logics that tend towards policy short-termism, that exalt only certain types of evaluation and effectively undermine efforts that hold ethical, unstable, generative and more uncertain commitments at their core. Ghanbarpour et al. (2020) notes that there has certainly been limited discussion in relevant literatures of how language, equity and power relate in the context of evaluation practice. This is certainly our perspective in relation to higher education, equity and evaluation of policy and practice. What does exist often focuses on methods, yet what we want to think about here is methodological. Specifically, we want to foreground how methodology is underpinned by the language shaping it. For example, 'evidence' immediately shapes the way we think methodologically and with hegemonic effects. And, in historicising our practice as a

praxis, one that might help us to remember what it is we are bringing to the project of trying to understand and potentially evaluate an activity in higher education, we yearn for an approach that foregrounds throughout how ‘language suppression and erasure have historically been used by colonizers as a tool of oppression’ and what this might mean for evaluative projects in education (Ghanbarpour et al. 2020, p. 39).

There are longstanding and ongoing debates that consider the complicated role evaluation plays in relation to social justice efforts, including how the common ‘what works’ focus makes it almost impossible to ask prior, important questions including who gets to determine what is meant by ‘working’ (Biesta 2007). This is deeply entwined with the limitations of language and how language shapes the imaginaries of what processes of evaluation can be like and what they can ‘do’. In our view it is certainly not common enough to see policy and program evaluation engage at length and in detail with ‘contextual dimensions of power, economy, living situation, and class, among other denominators of equity and socio-political status, and the contextual dimensions specific to culture’ (SenGupta, Hopson & Thompson-Robinson 2004, p. 6). It is also important to consider how privilege (including White privilege) tends to operate in relation to processes of evaluation (Kirkhart 2016), or to challenge the presumption that evaluators can fully understand a cultural context (LaFrance 2004). If we are interested in equity, then we need to consider how knowledge systems influence evaluative thinking and how a particular ‘politics of knowledge’ and evidence hierarchies become obstacles to more equitable evaluation (Wehipeihana & McKegg 2018). Specific to our immediate context and project are questions explored by some scholars of evaluation (for example: Cooksy 2007; Rallis & Rossman 2000) in terms of the role that language, as an aspect of culture, plays in processes of evaluation, and how related value systems can be unpacked to produce more explicit and participatory way of forming value positions (Alkin, Vo & Christie 2012). Beyond this, though, we want to also challenge evaluation (and evaluators) to consider the ways that language is itself an active force tied to knowledge and power that helps to regulate and produce the ways we are able to make meaning, and to be, and to do, including in contexts of evaluation. If we are to take seriously, for example, evaluating funded efforts to walk alongside students from refugee backgrounds in higher education as they access and navigate racialised institutional contexts inhabited by histories of exclusions and injustices (including those relating to language and culture), then we would argue that evaluation approaches and practices must engage extensively with these aspects of the context in question.

Our dialogue commenced attempting to begin an evaluative stance, trying to identify the ethical terms on which an evaluation of the approach taken to a student gathering might be co-constructed. Evaluation is commonly developed as a bolt-on, although we would argue it is active throughout a social process, regardless of how explicit.

Louis: *For me, ‘bourgeon’ works to allow language to operate in a given place, allowing diversity to flourish in a space, and also a kind of follow up and constant evaluation. The idea of ‘bourgeoning’ is about learning of changes after the implementation of a particular context.*

Following Flores, Garcia and Seltzer (2021), we want to note here how some populations explicitly marked by race, such as those targeted as underrepresented in higher education, can be perceived by the ‘White listening subject’, constructed as unmarked by race, as using language that should be corrected, ‘even when engaging in ostensibly the same linguistic practices that are unmarked for White subjects’ (García, Flores, Seltzer, Wei, Otheguy & Rosa 2021, p. 9). If, as Butler asks:

Then the critical question emerges: what world is given to us through language, and how might the alteration of our language give us a different sense of world? (2003, p. 203).

Then how is that we can better value differences present in our support contexts in higher education? We are wary of proposing a naïve and emancipatory potential by relating to language ‘differently’. We do, however, believe it is important to value the different knowledges and capabilities that have historically been excluded to provide opportunities for representation of different histories and experiences (Burke & Jackson 2007) if we are taking equity seriously.

Louis: *I mean, people participate in a student gathering for example. We must ask how the gathering can be an event that makes things easier for the participants for them to achieve what it is they want to achieve. So, the ‘bourgeoning’ is the outcome, the fruit springing from those interactions, those activities.*

Matt: *So, rather than pre-determining the outcome of the space, you are trying to ask what the outcomes could be, what the fruit might be of the interaction? I like that shifting the idea too of what evaluation can be. We live and work in this audit culture with endless processes of pre-determining and checking. I think you used the word ‘ask’, asking the participants what the outcomes could be, because they are expert in their experience of that space?*

Louis: *If someone is new in a space, we can help by meeting people and talking to people and think on their side. Exploring what is available and knowing the challenges and how to convince people.*

Matt: *What do you mean by ‘think on their side’ Louis?*

Louis: *I will give you an example. With the current news we’ve heard about Afghanistan. For example, Australia is going to provide 3,000 places [to refugees]. For me in the equity space, I start to think ‘ok, if there are people coming here from that situation, there are people who will want higher education, how can we support them?’. We know there will be issues around qualifications and different education systems, so it is being there to question how better to support. It can be simple things too. A few years ago, we organised for community members to contribute Ethiopian food to the student gatherings inside of the University and people got ideas that the University is not a place of monsters. ‘Thinking on their side’, it is to have patient understanding and a willingness to support.*

Final reflections

Our intention with this paper was to think and to write together from an effort between colleagues to remind ourselves of the enduring histories of colonisations and how these histories continually shape us. In pursuing reflection on practice and praxis, though, we want to recognise the warning that Kemmis (2010) offers in that:

when we make practice/praxis an *object* of our thought we risk shifting from the ‘rawness’ of conscious human social activity to *discourse* about it. We risk shifting from the perspective of action to the perspective of knowledge, from the perspective of practice to the perspective of theory. (2010, p. 11)

What can be lost in Kemmis’ view is the immediacy, ‘sensuousness’ and ‘human-ness’; a

sociality that can be both obvious and difficult to grasp. We remain stoic in a belief, though, around the importance of explicitly developing paths to personal praxis. We commonly see methodological commitments of deficit-fuelled certainty in Equity and Widening Participation. On this basis, we would advocate that a focus on producing critical praxis is important for making possible something different, that makes a broadly valuable set of differences.

We began this paper by locating ourselves in the contexts of our lives and our work, including the methodologies of higher education equity research, evaluation and practice in which we are involved. We then took up a focus on language as an aspect of imperialism and held this attention throughout a critique of hegemonic processes of evaluation that arguably help to hold in place a deeply inequitable status quo. Our effort here to develop a praxis by historicising colonised equity practices has focused on language, and languages, as an aspect of the challenge of building equity in higher education. We have attempted to draw on the conceptual framework of CEEHE and would align ourselves in this regard with Freire's (2004) advocacy for shifting pedagogical relations. Freire's famed context was adult literacy programs in which the communities he engaged were differently able to 'word the world' from their perspectives. We want to close this paper now arguing for the ongoing construction of critically hopeful spaces and frameworks that hold the possibility of apprehending, if only partially, and always imperfectly, the foundational frames upon which policy, practice and evaluative research is conducted in the Australian context. These are colonised, raced, gendered and classed frames of reference that reframe us as we adopt them. We believe in the importance of finding ways to remember this and, for us with this paper, we have tried to locate ourselves in histories as a responsibility to those targeted by policy and funding schemes.

References

- Alkin, MC, Vo, AT & Christie, CA 2012, 'The evaluator's role in valuing: Who and with whom', *New Directions for Evaluation*, no. 133, pp. 29–41.
- Biesta, G 2007, 'Why "what works" won't work: Evidence-based practice and the democratic deficit in educational research', *Educational theory*, vol. 57, no. 1, pp. 1–22.
- Burke, PJ 2012, *The Right to Higher Education*, Routledge.
- Burke, PJ 2018, 'Trans/Forming Pedagogical Spaces: Race, Belonging and Recognition in Higher Education', in J Arday & HS Mirza (eds.), *Dismantling Race in Higher Education*, Palgrave MacMillan.
- Burke, PJ & Jackson, S 2007, *Reconceptualising Lifelong Learning: Feminist Interventions*, Routledge.
- Burke, PJ & Lumb, M 2018, 'Researching and evaluating equity and widening participation: praxis-based frameworks', in PJ Burke, A Hayton & J Stevenson (eds.), *Evaluating Equity and Widening Participation in Higher Education*, Trentham Books Limited, London.
- Butler, J 2003, Values of Difficulty, in J Culler & K Lamb (eds.), *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena*, Stanford University Press.
- Butler, J, Laclau, E & Zizek, S 2000, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Verso, London and New York.
- Block, D 2018, 'The political economy of language education research (or the lack thereof): Nancy Fraser and the case of translanguaging', *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 237–257, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2018.1466300>
- Blommaert, J & Rampton, B 2011, 'Language and Superdiversity', *Diversities*, vol. 13, no. 2, www.unesco.org/shs/diversities/vol13/issue2/art1
- Bozalek, B, Leibowitz, B, Carolissen, R & Boler, M 2014, *Discerning Critical Hope in Educational Practices*, Routledge.
- Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education, 2021, *About CEEHE*, viewed 2021, <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/research/centre/ceehe>
- Cooksy, L 2007, 'Ethical Challenges', *American Journal of Evaluation*, vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 370–371, <http://www.doi.org/10.1177/1098214006298063>
- Datta, R 2018, 'Decolonizing both researcher and research and its effectiveness in Indigenous research', *Research Ethics*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016117733296>
- Fraser, N 1997, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Post socialist" Condition*, Routledge.
- Fraser, N 2003, 'Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition and Participation', in N Fraser & A Honneth (eds.), *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, Verso, pp. 7–109.
- Freire, P 2004, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Barr, RR, Bloomsbury, London.
- García, O, Flores, N, Seltzer, K, Wei, L, Otheguy, R & Rosa, J 2021, 'Rejecting abyssal thinking in the language and education of racialized bilinguals: A manifesto', *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*,

vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 203–228, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2021.1935957>

Ghanbarpour, S, Noguez Mercado, AP & Palotai, A 2020, 'A language justice framework for culturally responsive and equitable evaluation', *New Directions for Evaluation*, no. 166, pp. 37–47.

Gordon, R, Lumb, M, Bunn, M & Burke, PJ 2021, 'Evaluation for equity: reclaiming evaluation by striving towards counter-hegemonic democratic practices', *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2021.1931059>

Harvey, D 2003, *The New Imperialism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Ives, P 2004, *Language & Hegemony in Gramsci*, Pluto Press, London.

Ives, P 2006, 'Global English: Linguistic Imperialism or Practical Lingua Franca', *Studies in Language and Capitalism*, vol. 1, pp. 121–141.

Kirkhart, KE 2016, 'Equity, privilege and validity: Traveling companions or strange bedfellows?', in S Donaldson & R Picciotto (eds.), *Evaluation for an equitable society*, Information Age Publishing, pp. 109–131.

Kemmis, S 2010, 'Research for praxis: knowing doing', *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, vol. 18, no.1, pp. 9–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681360903556756>

LaFrance, J 2004, 'Culturally Competent Evaluation in Indian Country', *New Directions for Evaluation*, no. 102, pp. 39–50.

Lather, P 2007, *Getting Lost*, State University of New York Press, Albany.

Luckett, K, Hayes, A & Stein, S 2020, 'Special Issue: Call for Papers. Possibilities and complexities of decolonising higher education: critical perspectives on praxis', *Teaching in Higher Education blog*, <https://teachinginhighereducation.wordpress.com/2020/05/06/special-issue-call-for-papers-5/>

Lumb, M & Bunn, M 2021, 'Dominant higher education imaginaries: Forced perspectives, ontological limits and recognising the imager's frame', in R Brooks & S O'Shea (eds.), *Reimagining the Higher Education Student: Constructing and Contesting Identities*, Routledge, Abingdon.

Mirza, HS 2018, 'Racism in Higher Education: "What Then, Can Be Done?"' in J Arday & HS Mirza (eds.), *Dismantling Race in Higher Education*, Palgrave MacMillan.

Molla, T 2020a, 'African Refugees in Australia: Social Position and Educational Outcome', *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2020.1801942>

Molla, T 2021, Refugees and equity policy in Australian higher education, *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 5–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2020.1806727>

Molla, T 2021, 'Refugee education: homogenized policy provisions and overlooked factors of disadvantage', *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2021.1948892>

Moreau, M-P 2017, 'Inhabiting and researching the spaces of higher education', *International Studies in Widening Participation*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 6–10.

Naidoo, L, Wilkinson, J, Adoniou, M & Langat, K 2018, *Refugee Background Students Transitioning Into Higher Education: Navigating Complex Spaces*, Singapore: Springer.

Naylor, R, Terry, L, Rizzo, A, Nguyen, N & Mifsud, N 2019, 'Structural Inequality in Refugee

- Participation in Higher Education', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 2142–2158, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez077>
- Phillipson, R 2008, The Linguistic Imperialism of Neoliberal Empire, *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 1–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427580701696886>
- Rainford, J 2021, 'Working with/in institutions: how policy enactment in widening participation is shaped through practitioners' experience', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 42, no. 2, pp. 287–303, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2020.1865130>
- Rallis, S & Rossman, G 2000, 'Dialogue for Learning: Evaluator as Critical Friend', *New Directions for Evaluation*, 2000, no. 86, pp. 81–92, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.1174>
- Said, E 1993, *Culture and imperialism*, Chatto & Windus, London.
- Salleh, A 1997, *Ecofeminism as Politics*, Zed, London.
- SenGupta, S, Hopson, R & Thompson-Robinson, M 2004, 'Cultural Competence in Evaluation: An Overview', *New Directions for Evaluation*, 2004, no. 102, pp. 5–19.
- Stein, S 2019, 'Beyond Higher Education as We Know it: Gesturing Towards Decolonial Horizons of Possibility', *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 143–161, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-018-9622-7>
- Tuhiwai-Smith, L 1999, *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Zed Books, London and University of Otago Press, Dunedin.
- Van Rensburg, W 2006, 'Critical Praxis', *Education as Change*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 1–2, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/16823200609487135>
- Wehipeihana, N & McKegg, K 2018, 'Values and culture in evaluative thinking: Insights from Aotearoa New Zealand', *New Directions for Evaluation*, no. 158, pp. 93–107.
- White, C 1904, *The story of the blacks. The Aborigines of Australia*, <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks13/1300091h.html>