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TITLE: An Interwoven Learning Exchange: Transforming Research -Teaching Relationships in the Top End, Northern Australia

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An Interwoven Learning Exchange: Transforming Research -Teaching Relationships in the Top End, Northern Australia

Abstract

In this paper, we explore processes of learning through a focus on relationships.

Situated within the context of our research on educational tourism with Indigenous tour operators in the Northern Territory, we examine the relationships built between three groups: ourselves, Indigenous tour operators and undergraduate university students. We develop a conceptualisation of teaching and research as an interwoven learning exchange characterised by multi-directional learning experiences within which all collaborators teach, research and learn. By viewing all contributors, including ourselves, as active and multiple situated co-learners, we begin a process of recognising and reconfiguring power relationships. We reflect on how an interwoven learning exchange may bring new subjectivities into being through transformed research-teaching relationships.

KEY WORDS

Pedagogy, methodology, relationships, interwoven learning exchange, Northern Territory, family/work balance, Indigenous tourism

ACRONYMS

TNT: Tourism – Northern Territory

Introduction

In this paper we explore the potential to transform teaching and research relationships through the concept of an interwoven learning exchange. We argue that an interwoven learning exchange can strengthen teaching and research by encouraging a range of multi-directional learning experiences. An interwoven learning exchange promotes processes in which research, teaching and learning are intimately interlinked and within which all collaborators are recognised as teachers, researchers and learners. Our conceptualisation centres on relationships of mutual learning and recognises the subjectivities of all participants as multiple and fluid, as well as potentially fraught.

All contributors within the exchange are recognised as playing complex and multiple roles, such as teacher, learner, researcher and family member, and as taking part in unexpected engagements associated with learning, teaching and research. The scope of the learning exchange is thus broadened to include contributors such as children, partners and research participants, often excluded or made invisible in teaching and research practice. Through practicing teaching, learning and research as elements of an interwoven learning exchange, we hope to contribute to a more nuanced picture of learning, one that recognises power relations and multiplicity, and one that encourages all participants to re-envision new ways of being, through transformed research and teaching relationships.

In this paper, we discuss the concept of an interwoven learning exchange with reference to our work with Indigenous tour operators in the Northern Territory and the relationships which have been built between three groups often separated in the research and teaching dynamic: academics, Indigenous tour operators (our research partners traditionally seen as research participants) and undergraduate

university students. We comprise three early career academics with teaching and research interests in development, post-colonial and Indigenous studies. We work with two Indigenous tour operators from the Northern Territory. The Wagiman Women Rangers are a small group of traditional owners at the initial stages of planning a tourism venture on their country at Tjuwaliyn Hot Springs, located 200km south of Darwin. Biliru is a recently established tour company run by the Lee family who are Larrakia traditional owners of Darwin. Biliru currently runs tours in Darwin. Ten students were drawn from human geography undergraduate courses at Macquarie University and the University of Newcastle.

The paper begins by situating our concept of an interwoven learning exchange within the methodological and pedagogical literature. We then outline the process through which our research and teaching in the Northern Territory developed, and begin to unravel some of the threads associated with the specific learning exchange experienced by ourselves, the Wagiman Women Rangers, Biliru and our students, during a pilot study tour undertaken in April 2006. The final section of the paper reflects on how an interwoven learning exchange may create opportunities to transform relationships in both research and teaching.

Teaching, learning and research

The connections, issues and dynamics around teaching and research have been the subject of a vast amount of important research. For example, there are important literatures that focus on relationships between teaching and learning, between research and research participants, between teaching and research, and between academics and family. Each of these complex relationships, however, has largely been explored in isolation from the others. In this section we touch on the

major themes associated with the four central bodies of literature on teaching and research. Specifically, we look for connections between the various literatures with the aim of teasing out the complex inter-play of teaching, research and learning.

Teaching and learning

The relationship between teaching and learning, or between student and teacher, is the focus of a diverse body of pedagogical research that stresses the importance of understanding students as active knowledge producers rather than passive recipients of information. This work tends to conceptualise the relationship between teachers and students as a process of ‘co-learning’ (Howitt, 2000; Gibbs *et al.*, 2004; Le Heron *et al.*, 2006). Within education there is a long history of pedagogical approaches that go beyond an information delivery model to view the student-teacher relationships in terms of a dialogue. An important example is Paolo Freire’s work including his *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1972) which centres on the life experiences of the learner. Freire strives to overcome the idea that the teacher possesses knowledge that she or he then imparts to a student. Instead, through praxis, the ‘teacher’ facilitates learning by helping learners problematise the world in which they live. From such a position, learners are able to analyse their own realities in a way that sees them as active subjects in a position to fight for emancipation.

The idea of teaching as praxis points to the need to understand teaching as ‘collaboration with others, rather than for others’ (Gibbs *et al.*, 2004: 183). Learning is conducted as a joint project through which both parties increase understanding and explore knowledge. Unidirectional relationships often assumed within capacity building work are challenged in order to reframe relationships and practices (Suchet-

Pearson and Howitt, 2006). Such a step involves a revisioning of both power and knowledge, moving beyond a teacher-controlled model to one based on joint learning, collaboration and mutuality.

Resonances of this approach (although often in a significantly de-radicalised/depoliticised form) are found within the ideas of active learning and problem-based learning that are increasingly prevalent within teaching models at the university level (Bradbeer *et al.*, 2004; Buchy, 2004). These approaches are based on the idea that the role of a teacher is to foster and support students in their own process of learning (Marton *et al.*, 1993; Mahar and Thompson Tetreault, 1994). Problem-based learning helps students apply their learning to real-world situations and to see themselves as active participants (Abrandt Dahlgren and Oberg, 2001).

Geography, as a discipline concerned with place, diversity and difference, has a history of promoting such student-centred teaching styles. In particular, an experiential learning approach, which focuses on teaching mechanisms that incorporate active student involvement, has a long tradition in undergraduate geography teaching (Healey and Jenkins, 2000; Hirsch and Lloyd, 2005). Monk (2000) reflects on a number of approaches in geography teaching that link theory and practice and take students beyond the passive gaze of traditional fieldwork by engaging them directly with the (local) 'other'. It is this engagement, and the relationships that stem from it, that provides the focus for our research.

Research relationships

The importance of understanding and reconfiguring relationships associated with the research process, and indeed questioning the very assumptions underpinning research itself, is the focus of another vital area of literature. Once

again this field is vast, complex and ever expanding. Based on an analysis of the oppressive and colonising practices associated with much mainstream research, the relationship between the researcher and research participant has been the subject of a great deal of discussion, particularly in the area of Indigenous, post-colonial, cross-cultural and feminist methodologies (see for example Smith, 1999; Gibson-Graham, 1994; de Ishtar, 2005; Howitt and Stevens, 2005; Hodge and Lester, 2006). Much of the work in this area deals both with the fraught nature of research relationships and with the possibilities associated with collaborative and action-based approaches (Bishop and Glynn, 2003; Reed and Peters, 2004). In particular, there are important calls from both Indigenous and feminist theorists to understand power relations as embedded in the process of research – including in fieldwork (Wolf, 1993; Smith, 1999), and for researchers to reflect on their own positionality in the research process (see Rose, 1997). Researchers call for a dialogic model of engagement that emphasises ‘speaking with’ rather than ‘speaking for’, and stress the places of ‘in-betweenness’ as sites of potential relationship building (Gold, 2002; Suchet-Pearson *et al.* 2005).

Collaborative approaches, including participatory action research, take this further (although the power relations and positionalities are always complex) by calling for meaningful processes of engagement in which research collaborators (rather than research ‘subjects’) shape the research, and become, in effect co-researchers (Kindon, 2005). Recognising the depth of the issues at stake, such approaches call for epistemological changes such that the very idea of knowledge and knowledge acquisition are reconfigured (Cameron and Gibson, 2005; Wright, 2005). In Indigenous and postcolonial work, this means recognising and respecting Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing and rebuilding ideas of research based

on respect and collaboration rather than extraction and exploitation (Hodge and Lester, 2006). This requires flexibility and openness to framing research in diverse ways, for co-generation of research topics, choice of methods, outcomes and timing (Kindon and Latham 2002). These ideas, however, often conflict with current university priorities (Gustafson, 2000). The process of collaboration is an ongoing exercise in trust building, mutual respect and empowerment (Miller, 2004).

Teaching and research

The link between teaching and research (in the academy) is also something that has gained attention in the literature. The issue is often framed as a response to the increasing demands on lecturer's time and the calls for increased attention to both teaching and research in a changing institutional context (Brew, 1999). In fact, a fair proportion of literature frames these areas in an adversarial way in which the increasing pressures on academics for research outputs drains time, attention and resources from the pursuit of good teaching practice and vice versa (McLean and Barker, 2004).

Others, for example Rowley (1996, see also McLean and Barker, 2004), argue that research and teaching can inform each other in a synergistic relationship. Calling for the university to be (re)conceptualised as primarily a site for learning, and for learning to be understood as the primary activity of all academic work, Le Heron *et al.*, (2006) make a compelling argument for linking research and teaching in geography in a fundamentally transformative way.

Academics and family

A new but burgeoning area of literature refers to the challenges associated with being an academic and a family member, and the way these subjectivities influence research practice. Such work is often framed in terms of the inequalities and challenges associated with those working under more flexible work conditions (see for example Birnie *et al.*, 2005) with particular reference to gender inequalities created by a structure still built around the model of a lone-wolf (male, untied by external obligation etc) researcher/academic (Armenti, 2003; Benschop and Brouns, 2003). Children, partners and families are afforded a more active role in work that explicitly takes on the multiple subjectivities, and the power relations, associated with accompanied fieldwork (Cupples and Kindon, 2003) and pedagogy (Browne, 2005).

Even this short review of these literatures points to the complex relationships at work in any teaching or research activity. It is our aim now to try and draw these diverse insights back together through the lens of a teaching/learning/research experience that we undertook with Indigenous tour operators and students in the Northern Territory.

Establishing relationships

The interwoven learning exchange that forms the basis for this paper began as a research focus on the role educational tourism can play for Indigenous tour operators. Through discussions with the Northern Territory government agency Tourism – Northern Territory (TNT), the Wagiman Women Rangers and the Northern Land Council, we developed a research agenda focusing on educational tourism. This included a request by TNT and the Wagiman women for a series of

pilot study tours enabling them to trial and develop the tourism experience with students. The Wagiman women are seeking to assess educational tourism as an option for exerting more control over the use and management of their country. They hope it may promote an intergenerational sharing of culture and act as a catalyst for empowerment in land management decision-making processes.

In late 2005, our relationship was further established through a trip to Tjuwaliyn with the Wagiman women and their extended families. With two of us pregnant at the time, this visit to an important women's sacred area stimulated us to think creatively about how family and work could be positively integrated. In early 2006, an intensive workshop was held with the Wagiman during which a research agenda, broad research agreement and ethical protocols were negotiated. A critical aspect of the workshop was the identification of research projects our undergraduate students could undertake with the women to assist in the establishment of their business and their Vocational Education Training certificates in tourism, conservation and land management at Charles Darwin University. These projects ranged from interpretive walks to promotional material and website design.

Our first study tour ran in April 2006 and involved 10 students who had applied to go on the tour through a human geography development studies unit at the University of Newcastle and human geography research methodology unit at Macquarie University. In the lead up to this tour, the onset of major floods meant that the study site became inaccessible. At the last minute, due to 'sorry business' (ceremonial activities associated with a death in the family), the Wagiman Women Rangers were not able to spend any time with us at all. Faced with these constraints, a new plan emerged on the run.

With the assistance of TNT staff, including a staff member who was also part of the Biliru tour company, we refocussed the initial part of the tour on discussions with Biliru in Darwin. Following participation in Biliru's *Welcome to Country* tour, the matriarch of the family asked the students to describe the projects they had prepared to do with the Wagiman. After listening to the students, the Lee family expressed enthusiastic interest in these projects and how they could relate to Biliru's tourism operation. The Lee family, students and ourselves all realised a new opportunity had serendipitously emerged. Although everyone was still disappointed that the work with the Wagiman women had to be postponedⁱ, the interwoven learning exchange continued throughout and following the study tour. These resulted from a diverse range of experiences, including intense discussions and exchanges with Biliru and other Indigenous tour operators in Kakadu National Park and Leilyn (Edith Falls), as well as student participation as tourists in Kakadu.

Learning in practice

In this section we look in more detail at some of these learning exchanges and the diverse roles of contributors. Following the threads of three of the groups involved in our interwoven learning exchange – the Indigenous tour operators, the university students and ourselves – we illustrate the complex and dynamic way that learning occurs within and between groups.

Indigenous tour operators

Fundamental to our research with Indigenous tour operators in the Northern Territory is recognition of the multiple roles the operators play as family members, owners of country, business operators and staff members of support organisations. In all these roles the operators can be teacher, researcher and learner. In particular,

we are focusing on the on-going relationships in which students' projects form part of longitudinal research in which the operators teach us about themselves and their enterprises while they simultaneously learn from our students' and our own perspectives, experiences and research products. Our research agenda with the Wagiman, as well as our developing relationship with Biliru, sees the Indigenous tour operator as a teacher, facilitating student learning about Indigenous tourism and community development issues. The students participate as tourists and overtly evaluate experiences and give feedback to the tour operator on product development. Finally, the students also conduct research with the tour operators. In the case of research identified with the Wagiman this involves student projects which facilitate the learning the Wagiman are doing as part of their tertiary education. In the case of Biliru, student projects included design of a web site and tourist information sheets. Biliru had identified these as important for marketing and outreach.

At any one time the multiple roles of Indigenous tour operators overlap, contradict and reinforce each other, creating a complex interplay of opportunities and constraints for Indigenous people keen to be involved in tourism enterprises. All of the tour operators we interacted with highlighted the multiple layers and priorities that they need to balance. A powerful example was the importance of 'sorry business' to the Wagiman women. This was a salutary lesson for everyone involved in the study tour. As organisers, we had failed to seriously consider the all too real no-show contingency in our planning. The students coped superbly in appreciating the reality of different priorities and its impact on their learning (a fact helped by the constant reiteration by other Indigenous tour operators and Indigenous support peoples about the importance of 'sorry business' and other Indigenous cultural responsibilities). The women had to immediately confront the potential

conflict set up by a market-driven tourism business with family and cultural values and expectations and will need to take this on board as they think about the reality of running a tourism enterprise. For the Indigenous tour operators we work with, family life is central to their tourism work, with family participation often integral to the operation, assisting in offering employment opportunities as well as offering opportunities for cultural transmission processes. There are no clear boundaries between work and home, they cannot simply ‘go home’ at the end of the day (or fieldwork period) and leave the sometimes fraught and exciting issues behind as researchers often can. This fundamental interplay of work and life reinforces a critical lesson for us as academics and has shaped our research collaboration and teaching styles as discussed below.

Undergraduate University Students

The students found themselves right in the nexus of the learning exchange as their focus was on participating and learning about Indigenous tourism whilst producing material which Indigenous tour operators could use. We encouraged students to reflect on themselves in their multiple roles. For example, we challenged them beyond an easy separation of roles that would see themselves as different or exempt from problems associated with tourism in the top-end and from the hordes of (generally) well-meaning, white, development experts who come and go from Indigenous communities. They also reflected on the ethical issues associated with producing research projects for and with Biliru and drew from readings and discussion on research methodologies undertaken in class and in preparation for the trip. Reflective journals were assessed by lecturers as part of their course work, and material produced for Biliru, based on participant observation and field discussions, was strengthened by secondary research and careful review by

Biliru. One outcome of the reflective process was that their desire to ‘give something back’ was tempered by a realisation that whilst Biliru appreciated their work, Biliru would still pursue and achieve their own agenda regardless of student input.

Academics

Our multiple learning roles included that of academic, teacher, researcher, collaborator and family member. We directly facilitated our students’ experiential learning whilst concurrently researching the interlinked nature of teaching and researching. We established a research relationship with Indigenous tour operators and support organisations based on mutual learning with an effort to move towards a reconfiguration of power relations in research and teaching. In such a situation it was easy to be ‘non-experts’ in our relationships. The Indigenous tour operators generously shared knowledge and experience and we learnt, as did the students, much about contemporary land management practices, and about the complex histories, issues and aspirations of the Larrakia nation. Similarly, it was as facilitators rather than as teachers that we helped students focus their projects and practice active listening with Biliru.

For us, an important aspect of this interwoven learning exchange is the opportunity to learn new ways of approaching work and family. In particular, we are learning important lessons from the way Indigenous tour operators have to face the fraught integration of family life and work in the tourism industry. As three youngish researchers, early career, we are all too aware of the pressures to establish a strong and productive research focus. However, we also want to nurture our family relationships. Having children, taking parental leave and negotiating part-time work arrangements can all interrupt research and create considerable barriers to on-going research relationships, let alone publishing papers, gaining strong

reputations and attaining grants. Rather than approach research as an individual, isolated task, our collaboration has enabled us to commit to long-term research relationships. Although parental leave and part-time work are realities, we have managed our work load so that one of us is always leading the research and with varying degrees of support from the other two we have ensured on-going research development and production of outputs.

An interwoven learning exchange

Our conceptualisation of an interwoven learning exchange recognises ourselves, and those with whom we work, as complex beings playing diverse roles. We are situated in a web of power relations, such that research and teaching relations are understood as sites of multifaceted co-learning. Rather than conceptualising collaborators (including ourselves) in this process as unitary actors (or homogenous groups) based in two-way exchanges around either teaching, research or family, our aim is to acknowledge the multiple relationships at work. In other words, our subjectivities are active and continually in a process of (re)definition (Bloom, 1998). Far from being an inconvenience or sideline to the central work of academia, these complex relationships are central to the learning process. An interwoven leaning exchange centres the agency of all who contribute to the relationship as co-learners, co-teachers and co-researchers.

Looking at these relationships through the lens of an interwoven learning exchange highlights important synergies between the literatures reviewed earlier. While literature on teaching and learning reminds us that no party to the relationship is an empty vessel to be filled, it is through attention to literature on research relationships and its emphasis on reflexivity that we see students, as well as

lecturers, as actors needing to reflect on their own positionality in the exchange. All participants teach and learn, give and take.

Here, our work builds on that of others who recognise the compound nature of teaching and research relationships and have started to integrate teaching and research, work and family (see for example Howitt, 2000; Le Heron *et al.*, 2006). Specifically, by recognising those often made invisible in academic work, such as family, and viewing all contributors, including ourselves, as co-learners, we start to blur the boundaries between teaching and research, between work and family and between research and action (Pain and Kindon, forthcoming). In doing so, we begin a process of recognising and reconfiguring power relationships as we, together with our co-learners, reconsider academic processes and outputs.

This is illustrated by the research relationship between the Wagiman women and ourselves. In following an agenda set by the Wagiman women, and adapting our own needs around research and teaching to support their agenda, we are engaged in a process of exploring possibilities together. Another example is the emergence of a section on Larrakia history and culture for the Biliru website co-authored by a Lee family member and a student. These relationships encourage reciprocal visions and outcomes.

Similarly, we explicitly recognise ourselves as family members and social beings, and embed our families firmly within our relationship with our research partners and students. Not only did including our children and partners in our research help in the process of developing research relationships and achieving work goals, but they critically revealed us as emplaced within our own cultural contexts (see Cupples and Kindon, 2003). Acknowledging family and life as fundamental to our academic work and not some invisible sphere irrelevant to our research and

teaching, allows for a reconfiguration of academic work relationships and understandings of work itself.

Of course, just recognising the interwoven learning exchange does not necessarily mean the relationships are unproblematic. As our experience with the Wagiman show, there will always be challenges associated with these relationships. The women's original vision for using the trip to develop vocational skills in tourism interpretation has yet to eventuate. There will always be practical limits too. Although family responsibilities could be catered for, and the researchers and Indigenous tour operators were acknowledged as family members in the exchange, this was not extended to the students who had to manage family and other obligations in their own way. Although at the moment this has not been addressed, a female student's feedback specifically mentioned that she found it interesting and inspiring to see a lecturer juggling various roles (mum, lecturer, tourist).

Thus, while we are committed to working towards reconfiguring teaching and research relationships, we recognise that our goal of transforming relationships through multifaceted interconnection is daunting, to say the least. Working within a university framework, hopes of altered power relations and strong, long term relationships are, if not beyond reach, certainly part of a long-term movement for change. Paradoxically, though, we also realise that our modest steps towards reconfiguring our own teaching and research relationships are not enough. It will take more than efforts at changing relationships to rid research and teaching of colonising processes and power imbalances. Yet, it is our belief that change is both possible and necessary. It is in the spirit of cultivating such change and of trying to move down a path towards decolonisation that we offer our experiences.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ As a result of the 'sorry business', and other Wagiman family business, our research agenda with the Wagiman women has been postponed. Our vision of co-authoring papers, and follow up debriefing and interviews, is also on hold.

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