Confronting the deceptions of racism: whiteness, social change and teacher education

Introduction

We will highlight here the lessons we have learned about racism and about how to teach against racism from both the literature and our teaching experience in teacher education units which focus upon Indigenous Studies or Anti-Racism / Pro-Diversity issues.

It would be fair to say that most Australians have a fairly simplistic view of racism. Australian racism is often relegated to the past and attributed to generations long since gone. Contemporary racism is often seen as individual, isolated and infrequent acts which discriminate against or harm others on the basis of racial difference. On the contrary, we and others would argue that racism in Australia exists as anything but isolated, infrequent, individual and mostly historical acts of discrimination. (e.g. Helms 1990, Howard 1999, Jackson 1995, Vasta and Castles 1996) We also argue that as well as discriminating negatively against the less powerful, racism discriminates positively in favour of the Australian ‘mainstream’, that is, White society.

Racism in Australia is systemic yet largely invisible and relies on the participation of ordinary, unsuspecting, everyday kind of Australians, as well as the power brokers. It is based largely on the premise that White Australians are deserving of the dominant, central place in Australian affairs, and deserving of the right to consider their group as superior to all others, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. (Helms 1990, Howard 1999)

The dominance of White Australians is the problem in need of addressing, and over time has become a focus of our anti-racism / pro-diversity programs. However, ‘whiteness' need not be synonymous with dominance, which can come in any skin colour (as is evident in East Timor). The notion of whiteness needs exploring both with regard to culture, identity, privilege and social change.

In this paper, we are interested in how dominance affects White people; what they have to gain from it; and what makes it so hard to see and subsequently confront. Successful challenge must come both from individual personal change and collective social change. Some call this social transformation. (Howard 1999)

Howard describes social transformation as the process by which dominance is acknowledged, decoded, challenged and dismantled. The process and
amount of effort required is different for White Australians than that for Indigenous Australians. We focus here on the work required by White Australians. It is a lifelong process. As Howard (a White American) explained, "We must seek to transform both ourselves and the social conditions of injustice that continue to stifle the potential of too many of students from all racial and cultural groups." (Howard 1999:6) Until teachers understand this, they will not be able to offer Indigenous students in particular, the education they are entitled to.

**What is there to gain from racism**

There are very obvious gains to be made from systemic forms of racism, for the dominant group. These gains are all encompassing being manifested in material property rights, privilege, and a profound sense of rightness. Privilege comes in many forms ranging from the more ordinary (McIntosh 1992, Tannoch-Bland 1998) such as the complexion of dolls (the privilege of dominant representation) to more significant forms such as disproportionately favourable economic and political rights, the luxury of ignorance, and the privilege of voice (Howard 1999, Tannoch-Bland 1998).

White property rights and all of the economic and political rights which come with it are amongst the more profound types of privilege generally enjoyed by White Australia. Today’s generations of White Australians enjoy sovereignty and land ownership as a legacy of the first round of dispossession which commenced in 1788. The intensity of the native title debate, and the latest legislative outcome supports the notion of contemporary white Australians protecting colonial legacies of power and privilege. (Moreton-Robinson 1998)

In addition to the obvious material gains White society has made out of their dominance, there are three other major benefits rooted in our history and religion. These are the 'Roots of Rightness', the 'Luxury of Ignorance' and the 'Legacy of Privilege'.

**The Roots of Rightness** were planted in me, Merridy, as a child. I grew up believing that Britain had always acted for the good of all in teaching the colonised nations how to run the most evolved political, legal and religious systems. Howard argues that this automatic assumption of righteousness which is held by Western democracies had its roots in Christianity, not in the theology per se, but in the way in which theology was subverted politically to support European colonisation. Howard sums it up with,

"... deeply held religious beliefs regarding dominion (over the fowls of the air and the fishes of the sea), choseness (the chosen people), the
singularity of truth (of the one true god), the infallibility of church (and
the Pope) and temporal leaders (the divine right of kings), and the
power of the patriarchy have provided the backdrop for the drama of
White dominance." (Howard 1999:55; parenthesis added)

The Luxury of Ignorance allows White people not to notice their own culture
but to see themselves as ‘normal and neutral’. It also allows them to be
oblivious to the effects of white race status (Lucal 1996) and to organise
their lives so that they can remain ignorant of the issues and situations
regarding Indigenous-White relations (Helms 1990). Furthermore, the luxury
of ignorance allows White groups to live out their lives without being
dependent for success on knowing and learning about Indigenous cultures as
Indigenous people have to regarding White culture.

Amongst other things it allows White people to have a selective memory of
the past, remembering only the achievements of the ‘pioneers’ and ‘explorers’
and only a sanitised or justified version of the acts of hostility, neglect and
subjugation inflicted on Indigenous people. As Howard, says, “Believing in
our own legitimizing myths, we have been able to sustain a perception of our
goodness, even in the face of the horrific destruction imposed upon other
people.” (Howard, 1999:59)

Whites inherit a legacy of privilege. MacIntosh (1989) explained how, in the
USA many privileges flow to White people simply because of the colour of
their skin. Examples given include being treated as individuals and judged
on merit (and not pre-judged as representatives of an ethnic group) as well as
being able to take for granted the provision of products and services which
suit white skin and positively reflect white culture (make-up, dolls, videos,
television, school curriculum, books, history records, and so on). Tannoch-
Bland (1998) has applied this to Australian conditions. White Australians
(and Americans) consider themselves the standard and by default society is
configured to their needs.

The privilege of voice is a major tool of control and wields enormous
psychological power. The voices which decide the nature of what is to be
learnt, and how it is to be learnt, in Australian (and American) educational
institutions, are those which predominantly support a Eurocentric view of the
world. (Churchill 1995) Popular radio talk-back personalities more often than
not reinforce stereotypical beliefs about Indigenous people, as do popular
current-affairs television programs. Movie makers, television script writers,
and actors are mostly White, and when and if, Indigenous characters are
included, they are usually limited in their portrayal of Indigenous life. The
voices of government are dominated by those of White western backgrounds
as are those voices who make and enforce laws and policies. “Because of our
social position we have the power to silence or interpret other people’s
voices and cultures.” (Howard 1999:61)
Explanations as to the Intransigence of racism.

It seems that the success of racially based dominance demands the participation of most if not all of the ‘in’ group, as well as most if not all of the ‘out’ group. So, in real terms this means that most White groups are expected to fully believe in their own White superiority and in the inherent inferiority of Indigenous groups. Vice versa, Indigenous people also are expected to believe that White people have qualities which ‘naturally’ make them superior and Indigenous people have flaws in their make-up/ culture which make them inferior. (Helms 1990, Howard 1999) This makes the problem one of enormous proportions because everyone in the country is involved (even children) and it requires fundamental, radical shifts in the minds and hearts of the majority of millions of individuals sharing this country.

This is not to say that we are suggesting an equal sized task for Indigenous and White groups in the business of tackling the problem of racism. At the practical level, White society is in control of the social structures that dictate and maintain the status quo and therefore has the greater power and means to effect change. White people are also in the majority numerically, and it is easier for the majority to influence the minority in the adoption of particular norms (Helms 1990). As Helms states, “Social influence research appears to indicate that the majority needs to exert very little active influence on a minority in order to induce conformity.” (Helms 1990:194).

The need to belong to ‘in-groups’ and be distinguished from ‘out-groups, and the tendency for group conformity and adherence to majority views can all be linked to a seemingly basic human desire to be dominant over others. Research has established that humans have a propensity to categorise and negatively discriminate against perceived out-groups, even when the basis for that differentiation is trivial and meaningless (Howard 1990). Helms asserts that should members of the White dominant group attempt to question or oppose majority views regarding White dominance, penalties are normally inflicted on the dissident person or peoples. She says, “Significant others in the White persons environment will make it known that such behaviour is unacceptable if one wishes to remain a member in good standing of the White group.” (Helms 1990:57)

It is not uncommon for White people to be called names such as ‘bleeding hearts’, ‘nigger lovers’, and ‘do gooders’, when involved with Aboriginal people. White students have shared stories with me (Terry) about how family members had accused them of being ‘brainwashed’ because they were professing a new found awareness gained from Indigenous content in tertiary studies. So again, this underlines the enormity of the task of undoing dominance.
Even so, it is a task which is not impossible. Various authors mentioned in this paper stress the importance of not giving into helplessness in the face of such an entrenched system. Tannoch-Bland (1998) is reassuring in her reminder that history affords us many examples of how oppressive systems have been challenged and changed, albeit by actions not just by words of criticism.

She also gives warning to fellow White-Australians of the dangers of remaining ignorant of white privilege, thereby participating in racism, saying, “Significantly, by having unearned advantage that stunts our development, distorts our humanity and degrades us, we are damaged spiritually, intellectually, emotionally and morally, with enormous social consequences.” (Tannoch-Bland 1998:37)

**The impact of teaching against racism on teachers and students**

Over the past several years of our teaching Indigenous content in teacher education, a pattern has emerged in the responses of our students. The range and patterning of these responses and its impact on us as teachers, give some insight into the dynamics of dominance. The nature of the rationale reflected the ideology of dominance. The intensity of the expressed emotions of anger, indignation, frustration, sadness, shock, confusion and resistance reflect the psychological power of dominance.

Similar patterning in student responses to programs such as ours has been mapped by others into models of development, variously labelled anti-racism, pro-diversity, ethnic identity development, and so on. (Derman-Sparks and Phillips 1997, Helms 1990, Tatum 1992, Howard 1999) Research data from our program has validated the model proposed by Derman-Sparks and Phillips, in particular (See Malin 1999). Some examples from our data provide evidence of the tenacity and psychology of dominance:

**Colour blindness.** Colour blindness treats race as irrelevant, invisible and taboo. The rationale is that if we don't notice colour it will go away, or alternatively, if we do see it then we are being racist.

"We are all the same, only our skin colour is slightly different" ¹

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¹ Italics notates verbatim quotations from student journals.
Howard argues that, "... the declaration of colorblindness assumes that we can erase our racial categories, ignore differences, and thereby achieve an illusory state of sameness or equality." (1999: 53)

Viewing all people as the same means rejection of affirmative action type programs:

"Special attention needs to be given to all children."

"Isn't hiring Aboriginal people to tutor Aboriginal children a form of institutional racism?"

In fact, some argue that such programs create prejudice and discrimination:

"...the unequal distribution of benefits from the government to Aboriginal people and Anglo-Saxon people is breeding anger and resentment, therefore racism." [Implying that Whites get less.]

Consistent with seeing us as all the same, is the notion that Aboriginal people of mixed descent are really like everybody else and that they have no right to identify as Aborigines. A common assertion is that light skinned Aboriginal people are not 'real' Aborigines and that they only identify as Aboriginal in order to qualify for the handouts.

An additional extension of colour blindness is the idea that White people, who are perceived as the mainstream, standard Australians do not have a cultural identity.

**Blaming the victim.** A common response to examples given of oppressive practices, institutional racism and the like, is to blame the victim.

"I think the government should stop giving handouts and should let the Aboriginal people stand on their own two feet instead of encouraging them to feel sorry for themselves because of what happened to their Ancestors a good two hundred years ago."

In the resentment expressed by some people was a kind of downward envy where people felt that they themselves were being discriminated against by the government programs aimed at compensating for past and current inequities:

"Yet in the last few years I have developed an uncharacteristic cynicism towards government regarding the huge expense of handouts given to Aboriginals to enable them to live comfortably within society... I can only imagine the response if I tried to claim the Irish land of my ancestry that was
taken and destroyed by the Protestants. I certainly cannot be given anything I've discussed above, simply because I'm white. Is this not racial discrimination?"

"Your comment on institutional racism using the example of banks, I also don't have a driver's license and to get a birth certificate would be a hassle. I don't think someone would go to the same extent of trouble to help me open an account."

**Blaming the messenger.** A not uncommon response to a controversial message is to blame the person delivering the message. At various times lecturers and guest speakers received accusations of being bleeding hearts, politically correct, rude, intimidating, incompetent, uninformed, and so on. This was despite our best efforts to remain respectful and informed, and to choose guests who were likewise.

"The one lecture that was hopeless was A A S P A C [A S S P A] or whatever. We never really found out [whether] they knew [enough] [to] really ... help ... Aboriginal children. Looks like they found themselves (except the gentleman) a good way to pick up a nice pay packet without too much effort."

**Passive Resistance & Complacency.** All the examples above could be seen as resistance to the message of our unit. They constitute active resistance and provide rationalisations which could be discussed and deconstructed. There were other more subtle, and in some cases, less honest forms of resistance.

In our planning, we had been conscientious about not repeating content of previous units. Nevertheless, there was a claim by some of duplication.

"I found this reading rather boring because we covered this area fairly extensively in sociology last semester."

People avoided engaging with the issues of the unit in a number of ways. For example, by denying its relevance,

"I believe we don't see the full force of racial indifference (sic) in Darwin because of its great multicultural community. I personally have grown up with people of different races and within those different races have mixed also, so I have never been worried by the [minority]."

Or by paying lip service to the need for change but expending little thought or time to delineate and attempt to understand the specific problem or to propose tangible, practical solutions. The following quotation is one such example;

"Aboriginal children are always going to have a tough time at school unless we as teachers start to identify their backgrounds and incorporate into the
curriculum topics and skills that are seen as useful to them and not just the average white child.”

In itself, it seems like an honest beginning but when the same rationale is repeated in response to every activity and reading, with no deeper analysis, it is clearly an example of refusal to engage with the issues.

**Emotionality.** What intensified these rationalisations was emotion. Some of this is evident in the language used. The next quote is an expression of frustration which could be a cry for help from someone who may not have been ready for the enormity of what we were saying.

“This throughout my two years of study at this university, I have often felt bombarded with opinions espousing the atrocities whites have committed to blacks and how we should all aim to change the world and become radically pro-Aboriginal! I know that’s an exaggeration, but at times I have honestly felt choked by the effort at making us aware of the plight of Aboriginals. I am not a racist person, but I do concede to having been largely ethnocentric at times.”

Some people spoke of feeling angry or shamed or shocked, or even guilty. Some expressed cynicism and indignation. People’s emotion was also evident in their tone of voice, facial expressions, and posture. (See Malin 1999)

The lecturers and guest speakers also found the unit an emotional experience. It took some years for us to come to understand the patterns in the responses and to learn to not take student anger and resistance personally. Initially, my colleague and I interpreted student anger and resistance as our failure. We found it very upsetting. In addition, our teaching generated a few personal crises for students which took a great deal of sensitivity and dexterity to counsel them through. We experimented with different readings, guest speakers, videos and activities trying to eliminate the negative emotions. Eventually, we happened upon Ellsworth (1989) which enlightened us to the idea that these responses were to be expected and that there were ways to work through them.

In subsequent years, this realisation made the emotional responses and rationale easier to bear and to respond to. It also motivated us to suggest separate groups for those minority group students who wanted to concentrate on their own specific issues and be spared of having to listen to dominant group students grappling with their own prejudices.

**Ways for working against racism in teacher education?**
There is a great deal of literature on various types of consciousness raising, cross-cultural training and anti-racism workshops. Lynch (1987) has done an extensive review of these programs, highlighting factors that contribute to their effectiveness. Despite the age of his work, his conclusions are largely consistent with more recent findings. (Derman-Sparks & Phillips 1997, Nieto 1998, Howard 1999)

As shown above, the task of challenging racism or dominance is mammoth. It requires making the invisible visible, illuminating the privileges and in some cases recasting previous versions of history and social issues. Contradictions exist between the students' "... stated principles and practice, between inherited ideas and new information, between self-image and feedback from others." (Derman-Sparks, 1997: 5) Furthermore, the research tells us that if this teaching is not done appropriately it may result in reinforcing prejudice. For it to be effective, it takes time, longer than a single series of workshops. (Nieto, 1998)

The discussion here will be limited to a few principles that we and others have found to be central to the effective functioning of our programs. For more specific information about the pedagogy and content that we employed in our program see Malin (1999). Also, Derman-Sparks and Phillips (1997) give a very detailed description and explanation of their program.

I, the teacher, am also on this journey, and while I must acknowledge to my students that we are in this together and there's always something to learn, I must also avoid using the class to work through my own issues. It is difficult work and as Derman-Sparks and Phillips say, "It is important to accept that we are not perfect and that our self-discipline will (does) occasionally weaken. We need to admit and understand any lapses, and then forgive ourselves." (1997: 67) To do otherwise leads to paralysis. At the same time it is important that teachers who undertake the work of anti-racism should already be well informed and have already confronted issues of privilege and penalty in their own lives before attempting to present these issues to students. (Lucal 1996)

Establishing trust between the participants in the group is the first step, and inviting the participants to become, as Howard describes it, "... allies in the work of social healing" (1999:110) helps people to remain open to the challenge. In the initial part of the program, students need a forum to speak honestly and openly about their own feelings. Confrontation begins gently and privately at first and always within a climate for respect.

Affirming one's culture and identity is an early necessary step which for this discussion means establishing a positive 'white' identity. As has been explained earlier, the notion of 'whiteness' becomes the symbol of the normalacy of being a member of the dominant group lacking a sense of a
collective identity, ethnicity or culture. For some White participants this will be the first time they have been called to identify and acknowledge that they do indeed have culture and identity. This process must avoid the rhetoric of guilt and blame, where whiteness is seen to equate with oppression. Such negative emotions only push people into denial, resistance and self protection. People can only start from where they are and be entreated to begin a journey of self-discovery.

"Decoding the dominance paradigm" (Howard, 199:49) becomes the major substance of the course where white dominance is exposed, confronted and challenged. For our purposes here, we employ a model of white identity development (Howard 1999, Derman-Sparks & Phillips 1997, and Helms 1990) to indicate that there are many ways of being 'white'. We can be participants in racism or work against it. We benefit from privilege by default, which makes us part of the problem but we can also work towards becoming part of the solution.

Attention to the process by which the content is delivered is crucial with the ultimate aim being to provoke a wake up call, where necessary, and inspire people to take on responsibility to work together for equity and social change. The programs we refer to here are characterised by a high activity, developmental approach incorporating cooperative learning structures by which students are facilitated to clarify and evaluate their own values positions (Derman-Sparks & Phillips 1997, Howard 1999 & Malin 1999). The theory of situated cognition (Brown, Collins, & Duguid 1989) states that learning that occurs through authentic activity is more efficient, deeper and more finely tuned than decontextualised learning. They state that "(any) understanding is developed through continued situated use". (1989:3) For our purposes, this involved through reflection, discussion, hearing/reading real life stories from those who were 'there', including ourselves, through participating in carefully selected simulations of real life, and through conducting projects that attempt to apply the principles of anti-racism programs.

According to Howard, "White identity development is intrinsically tied to direct engagement across the cultural and racial divide." (1999:19) Each of the programs engage the students with the 'other' (which for our purposes here means Indigenous peoples) evoking in the students identification and empathy through, in our case, carefully selected 'expert' guest speakers, quality literature including autobiographies, biographies, fiction and ethnography.

While facilitating this engagement, it is critical that the teacher is in tune with where each student 'is at' in order to support (but not rescue) or confront students sensitively and whenever it is needed. Student journals and one-to-one conferencing provide a forum for this.
Conclusion

It is apparent, from our research, that the assumption of rightness, the luxury of ignorance and the legacy of privilege dominates the discourse which resists the anti-racism teaching of our program. The luxury of ignorance, in particular, allows the perpetuation of beliefs about racism having only oppressive qualities, not the privileged side which benefits all White people, whether it is welcomed or not. And according to Sweeney (1996), and the dearth of literature produced in Australia on 'White identity' and 'White race privilege' this is still the dominant rationale within Australia.

As Sweeney and Associates found in their survey of Australian attitudes, “The barriers to reconciliation centre on ignorance, apathy and fear.” (1996:iv) So if there are going to be any genuine efforts made to achieve reconciliation between Indigenous and White Australians there is much work to be done. We are all in this together. Breaking down existing barriers will require careful, strategic education and activity. White Australians in particular, are invited to look inward and examine their own history, identity, culture and privileged position. This is what true reconciliation is about; being reconciled to the self first and then going about building relationships which are based on respect and equality.

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