

Essentialist and post structuralist theories of race and ethnicity assignment

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Identity Analysis Toward Productive Pedagogies: An Essentialist and Post Structuralist Perspective Race and ethnicity will be used to analyse the central theme of identity from an essentialist and post structuralist perspective. Definitions of race and ethnicity will be presented and distinctions made between the two categories. The character Eva from the film *The Freedom Writers* will be used as a medium and present an argument that race and ethnicity are social constructs but not absent of essentialist influences.

Following a self reflection of my own identity the similarities between Eva and I show a congruence between essentialist perspectives of race and ethnicity to the existence of ethnic tensions and prejudice. In the context of Post structural theory it will be argued that it offers a more realistic and progressive appraisal of identity as fluid and changing through social contexts. Differences between Eva's and my own identity serve to highlight the inequality of dominant culture over ethnic minorities.

Therefore, pedagogical strategies will be examined from a post structural perspective as a means to promote inclusivity and authentic Indigenous perspectives within the classroom. Essentialist theories about ethnicity and race present these identity themes as fixed and unchangeable. Weber (1978) defines race identity as "... common inherited and inheritable traits that actually derive from common descent" (p. 368). The character Eva from the film *The Freedom Writers* identifies her race as "... those south of the border", or specifically Hispanic.

Ethnicity from an essentialist perspective differs from race as Zagefka (2008) ascribes to the notion that "... essentialist accounts of ethnicity maintain that ethnic groups have a certain ' essence' which determines their character" (p. 1). Therefore, essentialist ethnicity elaborates on race identity informing that behavioural traits are also biologically determined. Eva's statement " We fight over race, pride and respect" illustrates the essentialist nature of fixed, unchangeable boundaries that exist between her group and other ethnic groups.

Eva's racial hatred of the other ethnic groups is evident through her gang affiliations and violent behaviour toward them. An essentialist perspective would assume that Eva's racial hatred is determined at birth but as Eva's character develops throughout the film the essentialist perspective loses validity and Eva's sense of identity is seen to be socially constructed. Post structural theory maintains that race and ethnicity are socially constructed presenting Eva's identity as fluid and evolving.

However, Morning (2006) concludes that "... the conception of race as rooted in biological difference endures, at least in the United States today".

Therefore, ethnicity offers a more authentic analysis of Eva's identity formation from a post structuralist perspective than the residual of essentialism that exists in relation to her racial conceptualisations. In Eva's formative years her subjectivities about race were essentialised from her fathers' emphasis of her origins and therefore the "... need to protect your own".

The violence from other ethnic groups and the arrest of her father because of his ethnic background resulted in an intense hatred for white people. Eva "... hated white people on sight". Eva's hatred developed over time through social contexts involving ethnic and racial violence. Eva's changing identity is represented from a post structuralist perspective through narrative and social interactions in Mrs Gurwall's classroom. Marra (2005) states that " Narrative is a powerful means of constructing different kinds of social identity, including ethnic identity.... " (p. 2).

Using a diary as an artefact Eva is able to reflect on her own subjectivities about identity to better understand her beliefs and values (J Nailer, 2005 p. 152). Through social interactions in the classroom under the guidance of her teacher Eva's ethnic identity is reconstructed to establish a type of class ethnicity involving students from different races. As a self reflection process my own personal identity can be examined through essentialist and post structuralist perspectives centred on themes of race and identity. During my childhood years race identity was represented from an essentialist perspective.

I identified as a member of the white race and was educated from a white, colonial historical perspective. Instilled from an early age was the notion that being black meant being inferior. Not only did I perceive Indigenous people as those who sat in the park and got drunk but I engaged in racist language such as ' nigger' and ' coon'. My prejudice is highlighted by Brickman (2009) who suggests " Indeed, for social categories based on race, increased

endorsement of genetic theories (one component of psychological essentialism) has been linked to increased prejudice” (p. 2).

My parents assisted in the facilitation of my racial essentialism as did many other adults and peers of my own racial group. During my formative years my identity based upon being a member of the white race assumed greater intelligence, privilege and more appropriate behaviour than Indigenous peoples. The distinction between race and ethnicity is evident when according to Chandra (2006), an ethnic group is “... a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of a common culture, a link with a homeland and sense of solidarity” (p. 03). This statement relates to when I left my small town and attended an affluent private college whilst undertaking university study. Although surrounded by members of the same white race I identified with an ethnic group in the context of people from my own town. The essentialist and constructiveness theories for identity are distinct yet in practice difficult to separate. Ayirtman (2007) presents constructionist perspectives as “... the intersubjective formation of individual identities through confrontation and interaction with other(s)” (p. 0) whilst Chandra (2006) proposes that changes in ethnicity are constrained by “ descent-based” attributes. In the context of race and ethnicity both statements were appropriate to the way I constructed my own identity throughout my adult years. The immersion in multiculturalism from a large city and university institution influenced me to many different races and ethnic groups. The confrontation of cultural diversity increased fluidity in the boundaries that constituted my identity about themes of race and ethnicity.

However, the recognition of cultural differences in relation to my original culture and race still left intact some relatively fixed boundaries around essentialist perspectives. It is evident that Eva and I had different life experiences yet similarities emerge between our two identities. Prominent commonalities between Eva and I relate to the essentialist perspective of race and ethnicity our childhood and adolescence years. Both Eva and I expressed prejudice toward other ethnic groups based on the biological characteristics of race and ethnicity.

In relation to ethnicity and race the formative years consisted of seemingly fixed and rigid boundaries around identity groups. Juteau (1996) describes these boundaries as "... monolithic and static, seen as grounded in common origin, genealogy and ancestry" (p. 57). Similar to Eva the fixed nature of my identity boundaries correlated to racial and ethnic tensions resulting sometimes in violence, in varying degrees. Despite essentialised race and ethnicity in formative years commonalities exist between Eva and me through a post structuralist perspective.

Racial prejudice was socially constructed through repeated discourses of conflict between racial groups throughout childhood and adolescence.

Narrative through the evolving artefact of a diary allowed both Eva and I to analyse our subjectivities about aspects of our identities and both had the experience of an excellent teacher through which effective social interactions allowed empowerment and progressive reconstruction of identity. A key difference between me and the character Eva in *The Freedom*

Writers is that I identified with the dominant Discourse in society and Eva identified as a member of a minority ethnic group.

Thomson states “ A successful school student is one who has acquired much of the dominant ‘ habitus’, that is, ways of being in the world, as well as the cultural and symbolic capital derived from their schooling” (p. 8). An analysis of Thomson’s statement works on two levels. At the school level, and identifying as a member of the dominant culture, allowed me to be familiar with school discourse and the knowledge’s valued there in. Eva’s ethnic and racial identity immediately placed her at odds with the school discourse which restricted her acquisition of cultural capital.

At the level of society I was able to exert more agency through the social influence that a familiar discourse facilitated. A seemingly natural relationship existed through identification with a common culture, language and physical race attributes. Eva’s race and ethnicity reduced the agency she could exert against the dominant culture. Her common culture and race attributes are at odds in a society where the majority race was white. The similarities and differences evident between Eva’s identity and my own identity offer invaluable understandings to develop positive, productive teacher-student interactions in the classroom.

Taking a post structural approach to pedagogy teachers can be aware that their own subjectivities will influence the way they teach. (Nayler 2005). . In a multi-cultural scenario where individual students bring a variety of cultural identities into the classroom a teacher faces the challenge of facilitating inclusive pedagogical practices. Carrington advises that “... the teacher

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facilitates a culture of respect and value for all members of the class. ” (p. 113). This statement requires student interactions that involve listening to other students and being encouraged to support each other through peer assisted learning. Classroom organisation must allow students to actively participate in whole class, group collaboration, independent and problem-based learning. These student practices must be based around purposeful knowledge that engage what Thomson (2002) refers to as a student’s “... virtual schoolbag” (p. 1). Through strong relationships between teacher, parent and community what students have learnt at home and in wider society can be transferred into the classroom.

Therefore individual student’s “... knowledge’s, narratives and interests” can be recognised and built upon with high teacher expectations of connecting them to the valued knowledge’s of the school curriculum. (Thomson, 2002). More specifically, is the need to embed Indigenous perspectives into the classroom. When embedding Indigenous studies into the classroom teachers (non-indigenous especially) need to access authentic knowledge and often admit their shortcomings in relation to skills and knowledge required to teach such units.

Miller, Troy and Currell (2005) point out the risk that “ as members of the dominant culture (we are all white Australian), perhaps we found it easy to revert to a knowledge base that we had naturally accepted since early childhood” (p. 61). Teachers must be critical about the resources they select to teach Indigenous studies whilst forging strong relationships with Indigenous communities. These factors will ensure that Indigenous studies

are taught from an indigenous perspective and not corrupted by social, political and historical perspectives of the dominant culture of which many teachers identify with.

The identity categories of race and ethnicity can be analysed from an essentialist and post structuralist perspective. The post structural perspective of race and ethnicity presents a more authentic analysis of identity as being influenced by different social contexts. Whilst the post structural perspective offers a more progressive application to Eva's and my own identities essentialist influences are not invisible. The commonality of prejudice through race and ethnicity being essentialised offers an excellent reference point to show the usefulness of a post structural approach to productive teacher pedagogies.

A post structural perspective offers the opportunity for teachers to critically reflect upon their own subjectivities in the context of their own identities.

Teachers can therefore adopt pedagogical strategies that promote inclusiveness in the classroom and embrace the richness of cultural diversity, whilst linking the diverse array of knowledge's to the value knowledge's of the school curriculum. References 1. Marra, M (2005).

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