
**Fostering Voice and Representation:
Exploring the Use of Focus Groups with Indigenous
Australian Tertiary Students**

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Foreword

Jan: This monograph is presented in the form of dialogue between the authors, Elizabeth Mackinlay and myself, with voiced contributions made by *Indigenous students* as co-researchers. At various points in the monograph Liz and the co-researchers temporarily withdraw from the conversation while I critique theory that has direct application and relevancy to this narrative.

Liz: We have deliberately set out to create slippage between the authority of traditional concretised Western texts and the subversive playing around of voices, words, ideas and perspectives possible through dialogic editing and the construction of a narrative field text. Included in this playing around is a deliberate temporal slippage of past and present tenses throughout the dialogue, indicative of the multi-dimensional nature of narrative inquiry in time, space and interactions, and expressive of where we are at this point in time within the research agenda.

Jan: Liz and I feel that the idea of a dialogic text is valuable in encouraging readers to connect with the subject matter discussed; to join in the conversation and retreat at their leisure. In this way, all participants in the dialogue, either directly or from afar, stimulate each other to think and rethink their thoughts thus adding dynamism to the exchange. This type of format is not new and has been used confidently by several authors to allow for rigorous discussion while approaching ideas, facts and problems in a lighter style. For example, a conversational exchange adopted by Shor and Freire (1987) highlighted the creative and recreative aspect of dialogue. hooks (1994) created an imaginary conversation between her personal self and her writing voice to promote a certain intimacy for relaying information that was able to convey her strong feelings of connection with the subject matter. Huggins and Huggins (1994) chose a conversational style to present their life story; to represent 'so many years of talking' and highlight the many arguments that erupted during the writing of the book, the 'fighting with our tongues'. Lather (1991:146) used a 'playlet' constructed of students' voices to put her in touch with how it felt to have her work scrutinised. In this narrative, conversations between Liz and I are presented in the text similar to dialogue in a play. Referred to throughout as co-researchers, individual student voices appear as pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. My theoretical readings of this narrative appear as standard text and become reminiscent of soliloquies within the play.

Liz: By engaging in a dialogic approach, our intention in ways both direct and more subtle, is to emphasise the Bakhtinian view that 'the word in language is half someone else's' and our use of multiple voices 'animates the dialogic dimension here, and unmask editing practices to open questions about rights, authority, and the power to control which voices talk, when, how much, in what order, in what language' (Feld 1990:241-244). Our aim is to open up location of possibilities within and against the discourse of *Indigenous* Australian education to engage textuality as praxis, multiple readings, and research as negotiation.

Jan: We hope that you, the readers, will find the conversation enticing and valuable. Now to begin the story ...

Setting the Scene

Ross: *It's a bit funny ... it's a strange thing for me ... I take a step backwards because I'm a reclusive sort of person ... but I think this works OK ... because there are four people here so you can listen to each others stories ... have a bit more of an open conversation. Someone will tell you a story and you'll feel some way about that story and that will remind you of an experience you had and then you'll talk about it ... something good is going to come of it.*

Jan: These are first impressions voiced by a student co-researcher participating in a focus group discussion of tertiary experiences. His feelings suggest that the idea of using focus groups as a means of gathering *field texts* has legitimacy and is worth investigating as a continuing method. This monograph then, is an exploration of the appropriateness of using a methodology that includes the voices of both the participating students and myself as the researcher. Together our voices appear primarily in the context of how focus groups position the researcher and the researched within the research process, that is, how each is represented and heard within the story. At this preliminary stage of my research I am concerned not only with the actual content of what students are saying but their opportunity and right to say it. Of equal importance to the monograph then is methodological self-reflexivity as a researcher working with an indigenous minority group.

Liz: Certainly this move to self-reflection is a growing trend in 'post' forms of scholarship, particularly in the social sciences where scholars now 'openly engage questions concerning cultural authority, representation, power and agency' (Barz 1997:206). It is particularly relevant in the context of Indigenous students, an area of research where the often unequal and unchallenged power relationship between White researcher and Black researched loom large.

Jan: Located in the setting of tertiary education at the University of Queensland, this project begins to address the urgent questions raised by the spectre of colonialism in educational sites and Indigenous peoples' experiences of it to find a new pathway for doing research with, not about or on Indigenous people. The discussion presented here is based upon a pilot study I conducted with Indigenous students as co-researchers to explore experiences of *success* at university where focus groups provided the research framework. It is the launching of my journey that begins with methodology, travels through to theoretical and interpretative possibilities, and opens fields of exploration and discovery through mutual sharing and collaboration. This exploration of focus group methodology in the context of Indigenous studies and Indigenous education is just the beginning of an interpretive narrative which sets out to establish a rationale for the use of focus groups as an effective and appropriate method to provide a space where Indigenous students can voice, reflect on and critique shared lived experiences.

Choice of Methodology

Liz: Your approach to this project began then with methodology. Many researchers initiate and find direction within theory and past research. Why have you chosen a different route?

Jan: The approach I have taken in beginning my research project is based in methodology because that is the perspective from which I saw the demands of the study evolving, from contact with Indigenous educational issues within community. Put quite simply, it was among the prospective participants where the need for such a study became evident, not within the perusal of social theory or investigative research reports. Commencing exploration at the methodological stage is not an attempt to ridicule or devalue the place of theorisation but instead is a mere changing in order of approach. It was a deliberate decision in an attempt to highlight firstly, the valued contributions of student participants as co-researchers and secondly, to give validity to life experience as reliable data for research. The challenge is to arrive at a methodology that will allow answers to initial research questions to be revealed and further developed.

My choice of methodology as a beginning point allows for a more open exploratory approach to research possibilities that acknowledge Indigenous perspectives; possibilities that could otherwise be stifled by a more formalist theory-based approach. The formalist approach (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) can serve to enact a reductionist type thinking that can enslave the researchers and the field text within a constrained structure, and leads the former to disregard the enormity of the content of lived experiences as valid signposts to differing perspectives. However, hooks (1994:60) points out that a fear of theorisation and intellectualism is misguided. She emphasises (1994:67) that, ‘the production of theory as a social practice ... can be liberatory’ and is ‘necessary within a holistic framework of liberatory activism.’ It becomes a dynamic movement in which both theory and practice are making and remaking themselves (Freire 1985:11). The task then for myself and all co-researchers in this project is to enter into a process of critical dialogue and theorising of shared lived experiences in the promotion of individual and collective struggle for voice and representation, and positive power. Failure to develop critical dialogue, as applied to literacy by Luke and Freebody (1999:5), is not necessarily about individual skill deficits but about ‘access and apprenticeship into institutions and resources, discourses and texts’.

Liz: You have used the term ‘co-researcher’ to describe the student participants in your project, can you describe, define and explain this term in more detail?

Jan: Freire (Giroux 1985:xxiii; Freire 1985:68) believed that the term ‘intellectuals’ is held by all people who are constantly interpreting and giving meaning to experience through a process of conscientisation of not only being in the world but with the world, together with others. In this sense then, the students participating in this project

are making conscious contributions to my understanding as well as their own. Thus, formulating theory together from lived experience places them in a position of co-researching, researching alongside me in a research relationship, which is suggestive of greater equality than the traditional dichotomy between researcher and researched. Together, our multiple perspectives as co-researchers can help to validate that there are different ways of knowing, and all ways of knowing are significant in the role they play in resisting oppression and exploitation. Also, it will not be enough for the Indigenous students to merely 'know' their realities but they need to be able to transform those realities by also knowing what they know (Shor and Freire 1987:99). Awareness, self-reflection and understanding of life experiences combine as a precursor to developing agency not only as students within an academy but also in their future lives generally. I see this as important if Indigenous students are to gain any genuine and lasting benefit from their participation in the research. It also becomes essential on my part as a researcher for maintaining the integrity of the project.

I consider that theory is anticipatory and must emerge from specific contexts in order to examine such contexts critically. Theory must not be limited by concepts but continue to be grounded in concreteness with the aim of reaching a rigorous understanding of reality among co-researchers (Shor and Freire 1987:106). In this project I have attempted to bring some theoretical basis to the collaborative space in anticipation of its critical review by co-researchers. Giroux (1985:xix, xxi) maintains that in Freire's combining of the dynamics of critique and collective experience he created a language of possibility that encourages hope in spaces that have been traditionally characterised by the absence of power and opportunity to resist. One of my purposes is to shift emphasis from an outcomes-based research to a process-based research.

Although I have used Freirian thought in discussing the liberatory empowerment of co-researchers in focus groups I also acknowledge that his theory often fails to recognise the multiple subjectivities of marginalised peoples. Freire has been challenged for his naivety in patriarchal and binary views of the 'uneducated disempowered masses' that ignore influences such as gender. It has been pointed out how the inconsistencies, gaps and silences in his work have been overlooked in the overriding demand for liberation and empowerment (Kenway and Modra 1992).

Liz: So how are you reapplying or migrating Freire's concepts to address these limitations and shortcomings so that this liberatory ideology has more relevance to your own research?

Jan: Acknowledging the multiplicity of *subjectivities* among Indigenous Australian students in my study is a good place to start and remains the key focus of the research. I am also aware of the need to take care in not placing myself in the role of liberator or 'agent of empowerment' (Gore 1992), that empowerment is my property to give to

Indigenous students. These issues are taken up when I discuss voice and representation.

Narrative Inquiry

Liz: So what happened next? Where did your journey through focus group methodology take you?

Jan: My attempt to explore the possibilities of finding a more culturally appropriate methodology for underpinning the project compelled me to examine *narrative inquiry* (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) as an initial response to linking theory and practice in shared lived experience. It is hoped that narrative inquiry will bring to this project a means of contributing to continually changing phenomena in research by offering new ways of thinking about investigative inquiry and making meaning of change in the world. As key researcher, I will adopt, and encourage in other participants, a narrative way of thinking that will infuse the research experience.

Liz: Can you tell me some more about what narrative inquiry is and how it relates to your project?

Jan: Narrative inquiry is practiced within a three-dimensional sphere that encompasses stories of time, space and people. The context of each must be understood in order to make meaning of any event, person or thing. It must be remembered that there will always be uncertainty and tentativeness surrounding the narrative but the researchers can only give their best interpretation at the time while knowing that other possibilities, other interpretations, other ways of explaining things are possible. This untenable position of researcher and research material in which the reconstruction of experience is seen as suspicious and not representing the 'true' context, is often mistook as being not scientific enough to withstand the rigors of critical inquiry. However, this characterises the intellectual difference between thinking narratively and thinking in terms of a grand, timeless narrative (Clandinin and Connelly 2000:29). Ambiguity is part of life and is not something to be eliminated but used as a tool of learning. In this project, the grand narrative is university education where the universal case is the main student body is the prime concern. In narrative thinking, the person in context, the Indigenous student, is of prime interest.

The first challenge of this project is to create a space outside the classroom for Indigenous students as co-researchers to interact and share narratives, and in doing so move back and forth between the personal and social, thinking simultaneously about the past, present and the future. The methodology chosen is grounded within experiential research (Heron 1981a:154) in which participants not only contribute content to the research topic, they also participate in the creative thinking that generates, manages, and draws conclusions from, the research. As narrative inquirers we will begin with experiences as lived and told in stories creating a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic while at the same time

challenging generalisations inherent in existing theory. Our participation will be seen as conversations between theory and the stories of life with tensions inevitably emerging. Clandinin and Connelly (2000:42) point out that, as narrative thinkers, we must be prepared to have our existing, more formalised knowledge overturned and view people as ‘embodiments of lived stories’ not just examples of culture while at the same time not disregarding the truths of human social existence such as class, gender, race and power.

Focus Groups

Liz: What is the direction then that your method will take in the light of how you hope to foster communication?

Jan: To provide a forum for all voices to be heard and valued, I have chosen the research method of participating in focus groups (Imbens-Bailey 1997; Kitzinger 1994; Madriz 2000; Stewart and Shamdasani 1990) to facilitate field text collection. A pilot study was organised in September 2002 with the main purpose of engaging student participants as co-researchers in gaining their perspectives of the research purpose, methodology, product, theory and conduct of the project. I consider their involvement and contributions vital in directing the future progress of the research. In practical terms I hoped that a pilot study would allow me to concentrate on particular areas that may be unclear, to test certain questions, and generally to begin building a rapport with co-researchers as well as to develop effective communication patterns.

Recently, I conducted a pilot study of focus group discussions with 11 students graduating in 2002 from six different schools and faculties of the university collecting field texts (data) initiated within those discussions. Focus groups could be defined loosely as ‘group interviews’ combining the major research techniques of participant observation and individual interviews but with their own distinct method of creating multiple lines of communication (Madriz 2000; Morgan 1998). These groups consisted of three to five people meeting in a quiet environment that was relaxing and non-threatening. They engaged in conversation of certain issues brought for discussion for approximately an hour’s duration.

Planning and Organising the Focus Groups

Liz: How did you organise the focus groups for the pilot study?

Jan: The aim of the research project is to enter into a dialogue with successful Indigenous students at the university. Therefore the main element necessary for participation by students in this pilot study was that they had recently finished a program or were about to finish. I also hoped to have a gender and age balance for variety of response and richness of communication. I particularly wanted to include mature-age students who could provide differing perspectives as well as differing experiences that would be valuable for sharing and discussion. I also felt it would be beneficial to have students from as many departments and schools at the University

of Queensland represented within the sample as possible to give a wider breadth of course and program experience and thereby allow for variations that may occur in differing disciplinary, teaching and learning situations within the university environment.

With these criteria in mind I sent 29 letters (on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit official letterhead) to prospective participants inviting them to attend an introductory session to learn more about the proposed project and their role, ask questions and offer suggestions for the direction of the pilot study. Included with the invitation to the Introductory Session (Appendix 1) were a formal information letter (Appendix 2), Participant Consent Form (Appendix 3) and list of questions (Appendix 4) to consider that would guide the discussion and sharing of lived experiences while studying at the university.

I included the list of questions for three main reasons. Firstly, it would allow for the most economical use of the participants' time while in the focus group. Secondly, it would give them a basis upon which to make a decision as to whether they wished to participate and to what extent, and thirdly, it gave them time to recall experiences and decide what they would like to share in the group. I felt that an approach that gave the students as much information as possible in the initial stages would help encourage their participation, foster knowledge about, and trust in me, and generally create a situation where they would feel more comfortable. Different response avenues were made available such as email, letter, telephone or personal contact at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at the university. A short time span of four to five weeks, from the sending of the original invitations to the conducting of the last focus group, was considered the most appropriate to promote decision-making, stimulate interest and action, and maintain momentum once the process had been instigated.

Of the 29 invitations sent I received 11 responses from students who were interested in participating in the pilot study. Those students represented programs within the faculties of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Health Sciences, and Arts. It would be beneficial in future focus groups to try to broaden that coverage to include additional disciplines. Only four of the seven students were able to attend the Introductory Session but the others made definite commitments to be part of focus groups. Due to unforeseen circumstances two of the seven were finally unable to attend their focus group sessions but demonstrated their keen interest by communicating through email and letter. Although these students were not able to benefit from the interaction generated in a focus group these responses were nevertheless informative and valuable in gaining their opinions, ideas, and hearing of their experiences.

At the Introductory Session not only was the functioning of the focus groups discussed but also the students' roles as co-researchers was introduced and outlined with my interest and position established, together with the role I anticipated playing in the

project. Organisational matters included the suitability of days, time and space. It was agreed that the running of the groups should occur as soon as possible to maintain the interest already generated and to fit in with busy semester schedules. Different types of spaces were discussed as possible sites for conducting the focus groups but finally it was decided to choose a room in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit for reasons of privacy, familiarity and convenience for all participants. In addition to all these matters, related issues and any possible difficulties were raised. After consultation three focus groups were organised, the first being organised two weeks from the date of the Introductory Session, and the others to follow within another two weeks. Each group consisted of three to five participants and varied in gender, age and program diversity. A timetable was drawn up for the students to choose a preferred date and time.

The Focus Groups

Prior to the group sessions, the participants were given a list of discussion points to help guide the conversation in anticipation of offered and emerging stories of university experiences. Not only was there a sharing of past experiences, but also towards the end of each session participants were asked to discuss and give their opinions on the process of being part of the focus group and its appropriateness as a research method. The first step was made in the process of positioning student participants as co-researchers by distributing copies of the theoretical rationale for choosing focus groups as the method of research for their perusal and critique. Establishing the students as co-researchers was important in attempting to create multiple ownership that moves on from regarding participants as mere subjects (or objects) within the 'key researcher's project'.

Focus Group Follow-Up

Following the focus group sessions, and as part of on-going participation, the co-researchers were asked for their personal impressions of how they felt the focus groups satisfied the aim of gathering and critiquing their university experiences. Although I had anticipated that this would be addressed in the focus group sessions, the time factor of approximately an hour limited the discussions to issues of university experiences. A letter was sent to each co-researcher (Appendix 5) with a request to consider various aspects of the sessions in anticipation of a one-to-one telephone discussion in a week's time. This approach for further discussion was considered the most convenient due to the fact that as graduated students most co-researchers had left the campus but still wished to participate. Additionally, it gave them the opportunity to speak singly, and confidentially, with regard to personal opinions that may not be voiced in a group situation with others present. Reflection comments made by co-researchers in telephone discussions have been included in the text where appropriate.

Liz: At this early stage is there any indication as to how the co-researchers are responding to their participation in the focus groups in the pilot study?

Jan: Early indications regarding the co-researchers' responses to participating in the pilot study have been mostly favourable and generally support the rationale I have established in hoping to foster voice and representation among Indigenous tertiary students within focus groups. All participants have shown an interest in further discussion and action arising from their participation in their focus groups.

Surrounding clear themes of determination, perseverance, struggle and reward revealed through the voices of co-researchers in the pilot study is an emerging sense of enlightenment gained through enacted power of agency in shared student experience. In reference to the opening quotation in this monograph from Ross this was evident. At this point the voices of co-researchers enter the story with pseudonyms. Although he was willing to participate for the benefit of the project in which he had trust, and contributes to the general conversation, his initial reaction was one of reserve due his pre-conceived preference for a one-to-one interview to the more public group interaction. However, at the end of the session he was supportive of the benefits of that group interaction in the way it fostered involvement, with stimulating, satisfying and effective communication.

I recognised these phenomena of empowerment and social meaning as suggestive of co-operative inquiry. Reason (1994, 1998) proposes that people are to a significant degree self-determining; that they, in communication with others, determine their own actions – to some degree actually, and to a greater degree potentially. In turn, it could be anticipated that degrees of power be activated through strategies of communication among and between different groups of people. Heron (1992) sees people as co-creating their reality through participation in sharing their experiences, their imagination and intuition, their thinking and their action. Collaborative participation is a core strategy of research methodology that is intent on examining lived experience through establishing liberating dialogue.

FIELD TEXT 1

Lois: ... and you have to face mainstream protocols ... and that's what I said in the lecture ... I put my hand up and said ... there's no mechanisms for support ... he took a step backward and started to cover steps.

Lois illustrated how by voicing the experience after its occurrence led her to realise how she felt about the situation that had arisen. The incident happened the morning of the day that the focus group was conducted. It involved the co-researcher challenging an accepted idea presented by a lecturer in a university class, which she found was not exemplified in her personal experience. In voicing her experience and presenting it for group critique Lois was placed in a position of 'knowing' that validates the right to contradict notions of who is 'all-knowing'.

In the follow-up discussion, several co-researchers felt that the forum of the focus group was valuable in giving people a say, and in doing so, have the opportunity to possibly challenge discourse that continues to stereotype Indigenous students within the academy (see for example Dudgeon and Oxenham 1990:1). In particular, Michael considered that those stereotypes were often largely connected to class distinctions rather than considerations of race, the latter being the precursor for multi-cultural policy in the university. Langton (1981:18) disputed the binary notion of stereotypes being solely linked to race. The ignorance of many people within official positions of authority in the university neglect to acknowledge or accept the realities of class divisions and how they can determine life (including educational) chances for Indigenous students.

Neil brought to attention the lack of research being done concerning issues for Indigenous students within the university, and thus supported the idea of the focus group as an opportunity for such discussion. He felt that the forum of the focus group could have positive benefits in helping to change discourse that guides and perpetuates perceptions of Indigenous people marginalising them further. Michael wanted to reserve his judgment on just how effective these focus groups were until he sees some outcomes. While respecting this opinion, which I can see has its origins in the historical lack of trust by Indigenous peoples, some would argue that 'outcome-based aims' are structurally limiting in their vision in that they only concentrate on the end results rather than the quality of, and experiences gained in the sociopolitical process.

As co-researchers in the research, student participants are not only the agents of gathered knowledge but assume an epistemological position within the research agenda (Reason 1994:42), allowing for the possibility of achieving the 'knowing that we know' concept of Freire's previously mentioned. Reason (1994:42) extends this Freirean epistemology to include three phases of co-researchers' knowledge and research participation. These phases would be cyclic and thus each continually revisited: the sharing of experiential knowledge gained through lived experiences, practical knowledge demonstrating skills and competence, and propositional knowledge in which co-researchers express their thoughts and ideas in statements and theories.

In the follow-up discussion, Lois was of the opinion that the forum of the focus group is not a new concept to Indigenous Australians. She explained that, generally speaking, a group of people getting together in community consultation, collaboration and decision-making, sometimes of mixed gender and diverse ages is representative of cultural practice in historical and contemporary terms. She added that culturally bound approaches such as these are being recycled as 'new ideas', having been salvaged from historical extinguishment during assimilationist government policies of dispersion and relocation. In her opinion, as a result of this some participants in the focus groups may not realise that these methods are not new, and that some cultural traits may show within their behaviour that they are not aware of as being Indigenous.

Liz: It seems as though the response to the process from student participants so far has been fairly positive and that there is a general consensus of the promise focus groups hold for doing research with Indigenous people. How do you and the students see focus groups as satisfying the needs of your research in fostering voice and representation?

Jan: My rationale for using focus group discussions as method is to encourage multiple lines of communication in a relatively safe environment away from orthodox gatherings (for example, university classes and tutorials) where participants can share and build on each other's ideas, beliefs, and attitudes among people who come together for an agreed purpose. Focus groups serve to advance an agenda of social justice by addressing significant issues often obscured within power/knowledge structures, issues such as:

- Doing research for whom by whom?
- How is research conducted?
- Whose words are privileged within that research?

These questions remain paramount in my mind as I consider Heron's (1981b:20) notion of 'absolute determinism' in which a key researcher attaches a general, or preordained model of explanation to the research outcomes in an attempt at validation or to appear to be practicing systematic inquiry. Uncertainty produced within the method of focus groups that I have chosen will hopefully lead me to an openness that makes me continually question and explain my commitment to my own research behaviour rather than just that of co-researchers.

As key researcher among co-researchers I need to focus my participation and inquiry as a living process of coming to know rather than as formal academic method and, in this position, I must be vigilant in remembering who owns the knowledge and thus who can define the reality.

FIELD TEXT 2

Neil: There wasn't anyone from the unit here ...

Len: Was that a problem for you? Did it make it like ... more intimidating?

Neil: No ... because you had to ... it's weird ... they tried to establish your identity ... they didn't understand ... they still wanted ... sort of ... proof ... it was very weird.

This field text gave me cause to understand this new position of mine in my participation as a co-researcher. Neil was describing an experience he had had in a university selection interview in which he had difficulty explaining his *identity*, complicated by his 'White' physical appearance.

I realised that Neil's experience was beyond anything that I would ever have to experience, and therefore my link with his experiences could be no more than empathy for his situation. In co-operative inquiry the once exclusive role of 'key thinker' assigned to the key researcher is replaced with a relationship of reciprocal initiative and control created by shared, yet differing, and sometimes unique experiences.

Also as key researcher, I need to firstly demonstrate my competency and reveal my politics through showing some knowledge and outlining the desired learning process and goals that will move the whole project forward (Shor and Freire 1987:103). I felt that I began establishing this at the Introductory Session, and supported my position during the focus groups by sharing theoretical and practical initiatives for comment and appraisal. At focus group sessions I provided the co-researchers with an additional paper outlining my rationale for the use of focus groups as a research method, which was supported by current research and theory. My intention was to keep, and to continue keeping, the co-researchers informed of my theoretical position and research practice at all times and seek their input. I see this as part of my reflexive approach to the research situation and my attempt to remain vigilant and aware of the danger of merely perpetuating colonial practices.

The successful and informative use of focus groups in both commercial and academic spheres has been well documented (Edmunds 1999; Krueger 1998; Morgan 1998), however, as a socioculturally appropriate tool for this project, I feel that this method of field text collection is critical in giving particular significance to the voices and feelings of participants previously silenced. I am engaging Shor and Freire's (1987:97) critique of dialogical methodology to help explain and justify the process and space that I am hoping to foster with the use of focus groups; one that they call 'liberatory dialogics'; cultural action that challenges the status quo and counteracts 'antidialogical' practices (Freire 1974:131) of conquest, divide and rule, and manipulation. While Freire (1985) claims that his concepts are ideological and political rather than merely geographical it would be unwise for his practices to be culturally transported wholly to the Indigenous Australian experience. However, there is much to be learnt from his knowledge and teachings of fostering voice among marginalised peoples.

Dialogical learning in small focus groups seeks to transform critical communication through providing opportunity 'to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it' (Shor and Freire 1987:98). The co-researchers enter into a joint act of knowing and reknowing, and allow for the development of critical comprehension in themselves as well as the actual authority they are challenging. The dialogue does not merely offer a challenge to the status quo but also provides an opportunity for understanding the complexity of the object of the dialogue as it is presented for mutual inquiry. An interesting connection could be made here with the dialogical concepts of Bakhtin (1981:276), which outline the transformative yet unstable nature of dialogue. He describes the concrete discourse between subjects as 'living utterance' that acts on the

object of discussion and itself becomes an active participant in social dialogue through a socioideological consciousness. The utterance approaches the object that already comes 'entangled ... with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents' and thus 'enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment' (Bakhtin 1981:276). In focus groups co-researchers have the opportunity to act through the tensions of the utterance in shaping their particular sociohistorical moment.

FIELD TEXT 3

Tanya: *I don't think pushing Indigenous people to cohere to mainstream education is the way to go ... maybe kids don't want to go to uni ... that is why so many drop out ...*

Jan: *... perhaps this is an important reason for educating Indigenous teachers?*

Tanya: *yes ... exactly ...*

Jan: *... so they can get in there and change things themselves ...*

Tanya: *... so hard to change though ... I spoke to John Howard about it ... and he had nothing to say ... it's just so rigid ... government policy ...*

Len: *... because it's such a slow process I think it's important to have specific places for Indigenous students at universities so for those who want to participate in a Western education system ... so when you go back out into the community you take that perspective regarding the education process that is going on in the community ... you have the ability to articulate ... all the while being backed up as somebody who is educated and knows what they're talking about ... know what I mean? ... so both things are important.*

Tanya: *... [while] I believe it is important for us to go through the Western system ... we need to follow how our society is heading and that is just to empower ourselves ... but I also believe that we shouldn't be pushed to go through either.*

At this point in the field text Tanya and Len questioned and evaluated the position of Indigenous people in mainstream education. Assumptions are made in educational discourse (ones that I have actually made in conducting this project) that all Indigenous Australians desire what mainstream education can offer. However, Tanya and Len used their dialogue to work through the complex and tension-filled issues, while at the same time that dialogue became fluid in how it represented movement within the ideas.

A commitment to honouring Indigenous students' voices can be supported in focus groups by encouraging co-researchers in writing culture together through the sharing

of knowledge and witnessing of collective testimony. As displayed in the focus group field texts there are many instances illustrating this occurrence and I have included the following to demonstrate.

FIELD TEXT 4

Len: ... putting something back in ... like it would be nice to try and help Indigenous people out ... there's not enough Indigenous psychologists out there ... at that level ... we'd all be familiar with health outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

Tanya: I agree with that too ... 'cos Indigenous people prefer to go to their own people ... that's just how it is ...

Len: ... but it's just part of the system ... it's not something they're used to

Tanya: ... especially out in the bush ... I'll be going out there ... that's really important for a lot of Indigenous communities ... I think it's important to put something back.

This example presented itself in the field text when Neil, Tanya, Len and Michael deliberated the issue of responsibility to community in giving assistance and support as an important aim of completing their tertiary programs. Each co-researcher had their own idea of how they would achieve this but all voiced, reflected and empathised as a group with shared understanding. The knowing was not the exclusive property of one co-researcher; the shared understanding became the mediating object itself between the thinking subjects. Shor (Shor and Freire 1987:99) maintains that dialogue is not mere verbalisation, rather it

affirms or challenges the relationship between the people communicating, the object they are relating around, and the society they are in. Liberatory dialogue is a democratic communication which disconfirms domination and illuminates while affirming the freedom of the participants to re-make their culture. Traditional discourse confirms the dominant mass culture and the inherited, official shape of knowledge.

A self-reflexive attention to experience, as demonstrated by Len and Tanya's conversation, occurs in a collaborative way within the focus group dialogue. The focus group then not only becomes a vehicle for relating narrative but also validates itself as a research method by moving on to developing practical skills and theoretical propositions. Reason (1998:267) calls this process 'creative subjectivity' and relies on the dialogue of co-researchers to be high quality, critical, self-aware, discriminating, with informed judgments. An idea proposed by hooks (1994:64) suggests that theory needs to be accessible in everyday conversation so it becomes an educative tool. It defeats its purpose if creating and recreating theory becomes politically non-progressive by being merely a self-indulgent practice.

FIELD TEXT 5

Jan: *Do you have a confrontational sort of attitude ... or does that shift and change?*

Ross: *definitely ... when we were doing the Sorry Day ... we had some confrontations ... with the university ... when we were trying to organise stuff ...*

Tom: *...what normally happens is ... and it's been like this since 1788 ... once Aboriginal people start doing something well ... they [White people] tend to come along and try and take it over ... that we found ourselves ... if we let it ... could have been steamrolled by non-Indigenous people and ... we were not about to let that happen ...*

Ross: *oh ... yeh ... definitely ...*

Tom: *... because other people came on board who [were] really missing the point ... Sorry Week and all that pertained to ... but we could see other things being inserted into the week's events that didn't really pertain to sorry ... or saying sorry ... or feeling sorry ...*

Jan: *so it's like an ownership?*

Tom: *well ... I don't really think 'ownership' is the right word ...*

Ross: *... you probably have to spend [time] up in the union to really appreciate what goes on sometimes ... with just the other associations ... they probably don't know ... or they don't go out there to do harm ... they actually think they're doing something good but they're going about it the wrong way ...*

In this dialogue there is a rewriting of the theoretical position of Indigenous student subjectivities within an institutionalised preconception of how Indigenous students should fit into the possessive nature of the academy. Co-researchers, actively taking part in dialogue within the focus groups become theorists. They can build on theory while at the same time acknowledge their part in the process (hooks 1994:62). In general terms, the building of theory is complex and usually develops through engagement with collective sources, often from those who are not considered to be in the intellectual class hierarchy, for example, Indigenous students within the academy. By giving voice to the subjective experiences of participants in which complexities and contradictions are acknowledged, the process has the capacity to lessen the dichotomy often imposed in research between such areas as thought and feeling, personal and political, the observed and the observer, and the objective and the subjective. Although the voices of marginalised groups are often de-legitimised, especially when expression is comprehensible in the public domain, there is opportunity for 'resist[ing] the construction of restrictive critical boundaries' (hooks 1994:63) within cultural perspectives on Indigenous issues. If co-researchers take

possession of theorising through their dialogue and minimise the gap between theory and practice then that theory no longer has the power to divide, exclude or marginalise them by silencing, censoring or devaluing their voices.

FIELD TEXT 6

Lois: ... yeh ... we're a big support for one another ... I do get emotional ... when I failed one of my exams I was very very distraught ... you know I thought well ... how am I going to get through uni ... and it's now that I learnt that you could go back and renegotiate ways of doing ...

Tom: ... there you go ... you have a high work ethic don't you!

In this field text formulating theory from lived experience can become liberating. Lois became involved in a dialogue that shifted between rationalising her actions and feelings with her conscious self and those of others in the group. She came to realise that the dichotomies mentioned above are in fact quite indistinct in reality; constantly blurring and leaving themselves open to renewal and reconstruction. This became evident for her as she discussed her experience of failing an exam and the ensuing ramifications.

Situated as a consciousness-raising process, focus groups have the capacity for enabling co-researchers to facilitate and foster change; not only in practice but also the accompanying discourse. Maybe it is a small step in exposing layers of oppression of expression, and acknowledging the absence and invisibility that has surrounded certain population groups and, which has been a continuing criticism of postcolonial research. A concern discussed by co-researchers in the focus groups was what action could be initiated as a result of their dialogue. Tom and Ross thought that a student addition to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit's website would be beneficial in communicating their university experiences with other Indigenous students, in practical terms that exemplified their agency in taking such action. Lois suggested that pamphlets displaying similar information could be made available to workplaces to encourage prospective mature-age Indigenous students. Additionally, they suggested the possibility of visiting secondary schools to speak to students before they actually entered university. These suggestions represented a consciousness-raising process and the possible beginning of thinking critically about the self and identity in relation to one's political circumstance (hooks 1994:47).

Opportunity for action provided in the space that focus groups offer, not only represents the coming together of participants writing culture through sharing knowledge but also, as space to instigate and practice resistance strategies.

FIELD TEXT 7

Sharon: ... it's about identifying ... I identified myself with the Indigenous unit ... but I still have a lot of White friends ... my girlfriend Faith said 'I can't go in there' ... anyway so I grabbed her hand and dragged her in ... it doesn't matter ... she wants to come in here ... she wants to study with you ... and they were like, OK ... we got Faith like comfortable with that type of thing.

In the focus group, Sharon was sharing and critiquing her experience while at the same time reinforcing her agency. The balance of power shifted from one of domination to a positive role in which Sharon felt empowered to continue. Foucault (1980) encourages this idea within his power/knowledge paradigm that identifies a certain freedom available that can be negotiated within the power structure. In the focus group space this could be accomplished through dialogue and thus could also have a liberating effect. Sharon, in sharing her experience displayed control, that is, proactive choice, in a situation whereby she offered assurance and support for a non-Indigenous person experiencing discomfort in an indistinctly marked Indigenous/non-Indigenous space.

In this case Sharon held the dominating power in discerning how the space was to be negotiated and used. She took action that instigated her agency, not only at the time of the incident but her action was substantiated and sustained within the focus group dialogue. In hooks' (1992:116) experience, this is interpreted as 'having the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination', to create an oppositional gaze that claims the right to rebel.

Limitations of Focus Groups

Liz: Do you see any limitations impinging on the advantages of using focus groups?

Jan: Yes, there will always be some limitations attached to any method used in research but the important issue is that those limitations are acknowledged and accounted for in the research by the researchers involved. While field texts support many of the arguments for the development of agency among Indigenous students, there remain the questions 'Just how liberating can participation in focus groups be?' and 'Are there any possible limitations to weaken their effectiveness?' It must be recognised that there will be tensions and conflict arising in any group of people who come together no matter what their common goal is. A point I would like to make here is that while some researchers may tend to analyse group dynamics within a discussion group, in this research project those are of less significance than the content and meaning of the stories of university life experiences being related. Relationships that evolve during the discussion are viewed foremostly as serving the purpose of facilitating the construction of social meaning within shared narratives. However, there could be a concern where tensions may inhibit the flow of dialogue. Personality clashes are unavoidable in any gathering of people unless the key researcher wishes

to manipulate the make-up of that group. Otherwise, it is the skill of the leader of the discussion to negotiate the difficulty and assure that every member has the opportunity to contribute.

FIELD TEXT 8

Tom: ... and when the university itself pushes well-regarded ... world-regarded, scholars out of the university ...

Lois: ... that's a political stance that it takes ...

Tom: ... it's a university stance ... I'm sorry, it is ...

Lois: but it's political too because it's ...

Tom: ... oh yes L, it is of course ... most certainly ...

Lois: ... it's the political environment ...

Ross: ... it's about control do you think?

Lois: ... yeh ... it's about institutionalisation again ... it's going back to those times again that we're trying to get rid of ...

Alternately, as this dialogue shows, those same tensions may serve a positive role in introducing an uncertainty factor that makes participants more aware of differing views and other possibilities. Lois and Tom view a slightly differing approach to a stance that the university had taken with regard to the sociopolitical sympathies of a professor. Each was able to discuss that difference and work through the alternate views.

In relation to the structural characteristics of the focus groups in this project, there may be tensions present that hinge on general cultural beliefs and practices of Indigenous Australians. For example, there may be deference to seniors in the group that places a formality or shyness on some participants, particularly if the key researcher wishes to maintain an age range. Another example involves distribution of gender in the group. Participants may feel more comfortable if they are in a single gendered focus group, either all male or all female. Diversity occurred in all three focus groups, and although all participants appeared to be contributing, it perhaps would be unknown as to the extent these factors had influenced their participation. In follow up discussion, Ross proposed that the relationships between the participants could influence the flow of the focus group. He felt that personally knowing the participants in his group (one that contained both mixed gender and ages) before the discussion made a significant difference to how he reacted to those participants and his level of participation, making him feel more comfortable and relaxed in the situation.

Additionally, Neil and Michael felt more inhibited in the group they shared because the other members were not familiar, each knowing only one other. This situation made both feel uncomfortable in the group to a certain degree, making them hesitant about what they said. This was particularly the case with one member who was very reserved and was considered to give off a certain 'vibe' that was difficult to interpret. Both co-researchers then felt it difficult to consider the focus group site as a completely 'safe place' in which to express their opinions, whereas, three members of one group who were all very familiar with each other, felt safer in that environment.

Some cultural traits may present themselves, such as not wanting to come under public scrutiny by drawing attention to oneself. Although the participants' presence in the focus group is by consent and the desire to contribute rather than forcibly constructed, the focus group make-up is less confrontational or threatening than, for example, a one-on-one interview. A group situation gives participants the opportunity to decide how much and when they wish to contribute to the discussion. While others are speaking there is time to think about what is being discussed and frame a response. Also, an interview process tends to retain a question-and-answer type format, which completely defeats the purpose of encouraging dialogical development.

Where the key researcher wishes to maintain variety in the range of participants of each focus group, there could be the option of conducting additional focus groups that reorganise the co-researchers into specific age, gender, and program groups. For example, there could be a group each of all young females and all young males. This could add an even richer and more varied response to the issues at hand, and cater for differing combinations of personalities, and accommodate to a large extent cultural, gendered and age-related positions. Ross supported this idea. All co-researchers expressed encouragement for a diverse structure in the focus groups, saying that they felt a variety in age, gender and programs provided for a more intricate set of dialogues to develop. Lois added that people learn from each other's experiences, especially the young members from the older ones – an Indigenous cultural practice – they also share creative ideas and voice difficulties. Neil said that he did not notice any specific difficulties with having diversity in a group, and that those who had agreed to participate had specifically done so with the intention of contributing to what they felt was important to the aims of the dialogue.

Taking part in something such as a focus group that is set up to deliberately challenge the status quo could be seen as taking part in some form of complicity and may need a certain amount of courage to come forward and place oneself in a position where there is the possibility of ridicule. In Freire's (1974:19) experience with marginalised uneducated peoples he identifies in them a fear of freedom in which there is hesitancy in participating in critical consciousness. Although the Indigenous students in this project are far from illiterate beings their continuing marginality could inhibit their participation. Obviously those students who have volunteered to participate have overcome any hesitancy. Similarly, in some educational situations where marginalised

students have felt that their voices are not being heard can enter into what Shor (Shor and Freire 1987:123) calls a self-sabotaging practice that becomes a type of impotent resistance. They either refuse to participate in any way, maintaining a position of complete silence, or can become deliberately aggressive in anticipation of disrupting the group discussion.

Also, a situation may arise where participants may want to deliberately use the focus group situation for essentialist purposes. Individuals may confront the group and attempt to dominate or manipulate dialogue by using their life experiences as the 'true' representation of Indigenous experience. hooks (1994:83) describes this happening in gatherings of marginalised students in the United States education system who are intent on perpetuating a binary opposition on racial grounds. Furthermore, in the Indigenous Australian case, Indigenous students who are secure in their identities may inadvertently place other Indigenous students in the group under pressure who are not confident in their racial identities (Dudgeon and Oxenham 1990:5). As already discussed, through focus groups it is hoped that a space can be created away from identity politics where intimidation is avoided and multiple ways of knowing are encouraged and accepted.

In considering all these possibilities, there could be concern in wondering to what degree participation is liberating; just how 'safe' do participants feel in this 'neutral' space that has been created in the focus group? During discussion at the Introductory Session, Leah raised a possible scenario that needed serious thought. She suggested that a co-researcher participating in the focus group may become distressed in the process of sharing and critiquing lived experiences, and that consideration should be given to offering personal (even professional) aftercare support. Participants perhaps may not envisage a 'spirit of sharing' experience, in which oppression has been foremost, but rather participation as 'defiant speech that is constructed within communities of resistance and is a condition of survival' (Ellsworth 1989:310). Participants will either consciously or unconsciously assess the risks and costs of disclosing their understandings of themselves and of others. Also, participants' voices (including my own) become problematic when there is a failure to recognise that there will not be 'one' voice but the possibility of a multiplicity of voices among the group and individuals as shifting subjectivities manifest themselves.

Regardless of how appropriate the key researcher may feel the focus group method is, it must be acknowledged that this method may not be appropriate for all participants, for various social or personal reasons, or that alternative methods may be needed as a supplement to the focus group approach. I refer again to the comment made by Ross in Focus Group 1 concerning his initial choice of preferring one-to-one interviews in communicating with a researcher.

FIELD TEXT 9

Jan: *Do you think that is something [a choice of different methods] I could offer everyone?*

Ross: *If you want a more personal kind of information coming from us you're probably better off engaging on one-to-one ... I think because we're not going to spill the beans ... [in a group situation] ... that's another way of going about it ... because you might get a different response.*

Due to his reserve and wariness of speaking of personal things in a more public space he would have preferred a one-to-one interview, and suggested that participants might be given a choice. I acknowledged his opinion (voiced in the first focus group held) and thus offered at the end of each following focus group the opportunity to arrange a private talk with any participant who wished it.

Finally, there is the necessity for me, in personal terms, to return to the ethical and pragmatic issues of my own participation. It is not sufficient for me to merely self-reflect on my 'performance' (a pedagogical term adopted by Ellsworth 1997), for if my concern for transparency is genuine then I must submit myself to scrutiny by fellow co-researchers. In facing this daunting prospect I asked the co-researchers for their candid opinions concerning my participation in the project to date. All were generally supportive with some offering precautions and advice as they saw the situation. Lois said that she was comfortable with me facilitating the group but that I must always keep in mind that I am non-Indigenous and yet still representing Indigenous people to a certain degree. I accepted this comment in the spirit it was given, however, in other circumstances I would be conscious of the fact that it could be used as a silencing device in challenging my right to speak.

In a telephone discussion, Michael signalled that in working with participants I needed to be more forthright in my approach stating clearly what I wanted to achieve and how. I discussed this issue with him explaining that it was intentional on my part not to dictate what I wanted because that defeated the purpose of using co-researchers within a pilot study as genuine advisors and collaborators. However, if it appeared that I did not seem confident in my approach then this is an issue I must address, as clear aims for the project are necessary in avoiding misunderstandings and guiding its future. Michael also suggested that I present my personal position and ethical boundaries at the beginning of each focus group. This did occur at the Introductory Session, which Michael was unable to attend, in an attempt to save time in the focus group sessions. Nevertheless, it would be more thorough and practical to find a different way of conveying my background and position to participants, perhaps a written segment included on the formal information letter.

Ross stated that he was happy with the form my participation took, and that he ‘trusted me to do the right thing by him and the others’. I felt humbled by his confidence, which served to remind me of the huge responsibility that rests on my shoulders as a researcher. I appreciated the comments of co-researchers in guiding me in my continuing self-reflection of methodological practices. While this monograph has focused on rationalising and developing method for the research project, Janesick (1998:48) reminds us to be wary of becoming too preoccupied with the selecting and defending of methods. She described this obsession as ‘methodolatry’, a combination of method and idolatry that in this project could mask the main aim of the project in understanding the lived experiences of Indigenous tertiary students. It is now important that I shift my focus from a self-reflective position within methodology and give my attention to ‘hearing’ the voices of the Indigenous students.

Although there are various issues presented here for consideration, all co-researchers involved in the pilot study expressed a wish to continue their participation in the future of the project. Their involvement would include possible outcomes connected with, and instigated from their own focus groups as well as contributing to the proposed focus groups that will take the project further.

The Bigger Picture

Central to this journey through focus groups methodology, working with Indigenous people and yet beyond the scope of this monograph, is an engagement for all participants with how Indigenous students simultaneously resist, negotiate and align themselves with multiple subjectivities constructed internally and externally to the environment of the university. Through a qualitative methodological process of narrative inquiry, the larger *story* yet to be told seeks to interpret, and thus validate in postcolonialist terms, the lived experiences of Indigenous Australian tertiary students at various stages in their programs across a broad range of faculties and schools at the University of Queensland. The purpose is to identify and clarify elements of ‘success’, as defined by them, with particular attention to the role of postcolonial, self-constructed identities in this process.

Within the larger story and just one of many possible interpretations, is an understanding of students’ perspectives, experiences and recollections of tertiary education and how they perceive mainstream education as fostering success for future students. The question ‘What types of agency over the negotiation, construction and maintenance of self-identities do Indigenous students engage in order to ‘succeed’?’ underlies this research. The research process is being directed by the voices of Indigenous tertiary students as co-participants and co-researchers in on-going collaboration, which will indicate areas of theoretical interpretation. According to the educational foundation of this project, there is necessarily a critical pedagogical emphasis, however, pertinent and more obscure issues are also critiqued from viewpoints of other related disciplines such as cultural studies, anthropology, humanities and feminism. Possible exploration will involve co-cultural/standpoint

theory, co-operative inquiry, Indigenous Australian identities, identity theory, dialogics and theories of motivation and success.

Past Research

Equally important within the story are continuing issues of voice and representation and the investigation of how the valuable perspectives of Indigenous students expressed through narration and theorisation can be included in scholarly inquiry within the academy. These have been largely ignored in past research. A review of recent Indigenous Australian education research (Dawes 1998; Ellis 1997, 1998; Halse *et al.* 1999; McRae *et al.* 2000; Mercurio and Clayton 2001; Purdie *et al.* 2000; Schwab 2001; Trent and Slade 2001) reveals that while many studies have explored the progress of Indigenous students in a wide range of areas at both primary and secondary level, there has been little detailed qualitative work undertaken on the encounters that Indigenous people have with mainstream education at tertiary level. This is especially evident concerning the positive results of tertiary experiences in which lie constructive opportunities for Indigenous students to relate, and learn from, communicative encounters in the university environment where generally individuals are less cosseted. This story aims to fill this gap and findings could ultimately be beneficial for future educational and social justice policy-making within the tertiary institution.

Indigenous Content in Tertiary Curriculum – University of Queensland

An extensive study conducted by Lampert and Lilley in 1996 undertook research, which investigated Indigenous Australian content in curriculum at the University of Queensland. Surveyed were 20% of teaching staff members across all faculties who participated in in-depth interviews expressing both personal and departmental views. It was the intent of the researchers that the report would encourage further research and they acknowledged that a comparison should be made between what academics say and what Indigenous students experience as a vital next step of investigation. In this story I propose to extend the scope of the valuable contribution made by Lampert and Lilley by including another dimension to the levels of knowledge; that of detailed input of lived experiences by past and current Indigenous students at the University of Queensland. In the search for other related research previously conducted in this area some studies have offered suggestions of the significance of success but most are limited in the development of positive outcomes linked to success and student voice within the tertiary field.

Negative Aspects of Tertiary Experience – South Australia

Ellis' (1998) research relates directly to a 1997 study conducted by her with 50 students (Indigenous) and staff (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) in South Australia. She asked general questions concerning their teaching and learning experiences while attending university. Although Ellis collected negative and positives comments, attention appears to be drawn predominantly to the negative aspects impinging on the students' progress through their programs. The broadness of the topics covered in the

questionnaire implemented by Ellis tended to make the data repetitious of factors identified in other papers and studies across Australia (e.g. Lampert and Lilley 1996 in Queensland; Halse *et al.* 1999 in New South Wales), such as the effects of health, housing, finances, loneliness, family commitments, academic difficulties, and racism on the participation by Indigenous students in mainstream tertiary education. However, in this story, I intend to concentrate on the positive elements of student 'success' as those elements emerge and, in detail, to develop a consciousness of a postcolonial self-constructed identity.

Indigenous Identity in the Light of Failure – Western Australia

Taylor's (1993) work broadly explores negotiation and maintenance of identity among Indigenous people (including Indigenous teachers) in Western Australia, and offers constructive knowledge for this story. While Taylor describes the efforts being made by many Indigenous people to achieve educationally and professionally within the wider society, once again references made to Indigenous student participation in mainstream education are largely expressed in the light of low education achievement and failure.

Educator Self-Reflection of Racism – Australia

In 1999, Halse, Wilson-Miller and Slattery announced the setting up of a project to monitor the classroom experiences of educators of Indigenous tertiary students on a longitudinal basis. The authors intended that the project design be dynamic with emphasis placed on the varying needs and interests of educators in coming to terms with the often-subtle forms of racism found at this level. While the intention of their project may have been to provide a forum for educators to examine their own ethnocentrism, it is questionable as to how they were able to recognise such subtle forms of racism in the classroom if that forum did not provide the opportunity for student contribution. In response, uncovering the subtleties embedded within the experiences of tertiary students is a focal point of the narrative I am constructing in this story in order to gain a clearer insight of questions posed by valuing student opinion as an essential factor in that discovery.

Secondary Student Success – South Australia

Mercurio and Clayton (2001) analysed the experiences of 16 Indigenous students in South Australia who were successful in completing their secondary education. These authors highlight the reasons for their successes in anticipation that they can help other students to also complete their studies. Two particular points of interest that relate to this research are first, that the study concentrated on positive experiences serves to establish an optimistic viewpoint for the future rather than a compensatory one. Second, the important status given to the opinions of the Indigenous students plays a vital role in both the development of their self-identity and those of students to come. However, little has been done in this way at the tertiary level, and therefore, a similar study would be beneficial to both universities and students in promoting institutional and personal understandings of how and why Indigenous students succeed.

Valuing Student Voice – North Queensland

Dawes (1998) indirectly included success in his in-depth study of five secondary students in north Queensland over a two-year period but did not really take advantage of the impact that it had on students' school lives and their futures. Nevertheless, by allowing the participating students to express fully, with no time constraints, their thoughts and feelings, he has provided some valuable insights to the importance of diverse student voices in helping to deconstruct the homogenous social and racial category of 'Aboriginal youth'.

Emphasising Positive Self-Identity – Australia

The Purdie *et al.* (2000) project aimed to delineate the relationship between school outcomes and the self-identities of young Indigenous Australians. These authors recognised that positive self-identity is crucial for the successful completion of secondary schooling and advancement to further education, training, employment and life chances, consistent with students abilities. Similarly, investigations within this story of this project also focus on the issue of positive self-identity; however, I will explore more fully the evolving self-constructed images that tertiary students develop throughout their successful studies in this era of postcolonialism.

Side-Stepping Student Voice – Australia

An examination of recent Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) reports and other government key papers reveals a prolific amount of research on the participation of Indigenous students in secondary education, centring on curriculum, programs and providers. Schwab (2001) lists some of these for perusal in his authorship of similar research for the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). While this research has proven valuable for education policy makers and practitioners in schools, the findings become largely irrelevant when referring to the context of tertiary education and Indigenous students' place within it.

Accordingly, my bigger picture aim in this story is to move on from previous studies and align this research more closely with poststructuralist approaches in Indigenous education which aim to deconstruct the identity category 'Aboriginal' or 'Indigenous' as one-dimensional and oppositional. By doing so, I hope to illustrate the way Indigenous students simultaneously resist, negotiate and align themselves with multiple subjectivities constructed internally and externally to the environment of the university in order to achieve success.

The inclusion of ethnographical approaches (fieldwork such as case study and participant observation) in educational research has been aimed fundamentally at finding immediate solutions to problems facing educators. My previous position as one of those educators has now shifted to include a viewpoint with anthropological leanings in which the perspective on education is broadened to understand schooling as part of social life as a whole. Knowledge gained from such research can serve to develop relations between institutions and communities involved where in the past

sociocultural context has often been neglected. Hymes (1996:19) uses the term ethnology in an attempt to have researchers review the ‘why’ behind their use of ethnography. I interpret this theorising within my education research as not merely ‘doing ethnography’ with participants but becoming socioculturally involved as co-researcher among other co-researchers. In this way I hope to foster broader links to issues of socialisation, institutionalisation and the reproduction of existing orders in anticipation that an ethnological approach will allow for research to be more accessible to all stakeholders both within and outside the academy.

The significance of this study can be linked directly to the expected contributions. First, one of the main aims of this project is to provide the University of Queensland (and more broadly, other tertiary institutions) with a better understanding of the complex elements of how Indigenous students interpret tertiary success with a view to continually improve the learning and teaching environment through more appropriate and effective approaches. Second, there is the opportunity to guide Indigenous students in a better understanding of the reasons for their success (as defined by them) in promoting agency and further success in their post-tertiary lives. Third, there is a necessity to add to the level of knowledge concerning the dynamic nature of Indigenous subjectivities and the roles they may play in the future success of Indigenous students. Fourth, this study demonstrates the benefits of a shift from outcomes-based research to process-based research. Indigenous Australian communities value education as the future direction for Indigenous people. From my experience as a teacher in schools and my discussions with Indigenous students, I think an important step is to now draw attention to current examples of academic success, alongside popular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sporting and media personalities (e.g. Cathy Freeman) as a means of providing role models for Indigenous youth in the area of education.

Research Questions

Liz: Understanding the history of research on Indigenous students’ experience at all levels of mainstream education is important to enable us to interpret the types of research questions and frameworks adopted. What research questions guide this narrative and the construction of this particular field text?

Jan: My reading in relevant research to date has highlighted the need for an examination of Indigenous student success at university level where in the past investigations have highlighted tertiary failure. In aiming to understand Indigenous students’ experiences and perspectives of tertiary education and how they perceive mainstream education as fostering success for future students, this narrative is guided by the following questions:

- What types of agency over the negotiation, construction and maintenance of self-identities (subjectivities) do Indigenous students engage in order to ‘succeed’?

- How do those without societal power communicate with those who have access to societal power?
- How can I gain a deeper understanding of the communicative experiences of specific co-cultural individuals and groups?
- What communicative behaviours are practised to achieve success? Are these behaviours related to behaviours presented in the sociohistorical context of Indigenous realities?
- How can we understand the commonalities of experience among groups (students/university) without negating the differences between, and within, those groups? Additionally, in accentuating and reinforcing the existence of difference is there a risk of perpetuating Otherness?
- How can I link these understandings of students' tertiary experiences to how they perceive mainstream education fostering 'success' for future students?
- How can the valuable perspectives of Indigenous students be included in scholarly inquiry? That is, how can their ability to see dominant societal structures from the positioning of 'outsiders-within' be put to the best advantage for students and the academy? and therefore,
- How can the positioning of Indigenous students as co-researchers be fostered within the academy?

Voice, Representation and Methodological Approach

Liz: Let's turn now to consider voice, representation and how this discourse relates to your methodological approach. How do you intend to represent yourself throughout this study and how do you view your relationship with the Indigenous students you are working with?

Jan: On reflection, I see this journey having its origins in my profession as a teacher, and interest has grown from there with my undergraduate degrees in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and tutoring of Indigenous students at an Indigenous community school and at university. Emerging from those background experiences is a knowing that education is considered by many Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to be a necessity for the future aspirations of Indigenous youth (Stewart 2001). There is acknowledgement within recent government policy (Education Queensland 2000a, 2000b, 2000c) of the important role that education has for full and effective participation of Indigenous people in Australian contemporary society. While there is significant recognition of Indigenous sport and the arts providing role models for Indigenous youth and young adults, other fields of equal achievement are sadly passed over. I see the need to emphasise and promote the role of successful tertiary Indigenous students as equally important in fashioning the futures of Indigenous people.

Liz: And by extension the role of education in empowering Indigenous people to live out the complexities of their subjectivities as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians in response and relationship to historical, social, political and cultural contexts. In the framework of this study, however, it is not only the identities of Indigenous Australian co-researchers that are important, but also the subject positions of the academics who ultimately provide and produce the research context in which experiences are voiced. How would you describe your speaking position/s in this project Jan?

Jan: I am continually aware of my political position as a White middleclass female within this study, which carries with it lasting privileges rooted in historical relations and contemporary interactions; the latter being grounded in continued denial of racist domination and complicity (if what unwittingly) in continuing exploitation and oppression. However, under no circumstances should this acknowledgement be seen as an apology for the commitment I have undertaken in attempting to highlight the potency of Indigenous voices. Rather, an enduring consciousness on my part only serves to continually remind me of the obligation that is attached to that commitment; one that has been taken up in view of responsibilities to the academy and the Indigenous university community. Too often, constantly depreciating one's value could be regarded as a distancing of self from responsibility for any stance taken. Furthermore, I feel that an emotional shedding only devalues any relationships that develop between participants, and that often remain well after the duration of the study. Nevertheless, I am aware that social, racial and historical factors can create barriers that might make such bonding difficult, if not sometimes impossible.

Although there is constant attentiveness to power relationships and possible imbalances in my relationship with co-researchers, a certain level of authority on my part is necessary with regard to my responsibility for the integrity of the project. An evaluation of how I conduct myself is necessary with reflection on what my 'authority' involves and the way it is enacted. Heron (1999:20) makes a distinction between the positions of authority and authoritarianism in saying that a 'benign, luminous and truly educative authority ... manifests as the ability to empower' and is highlighted by emotional competence. On the other hand, he points out that oppressive authoritarianism seeks to, in varying degrees, restrict, control, dominate and manipulate others. I seek to be an example of the former; that is, one who attempts to empower participants through my 'way of being and behaving ... [through my] presence, style and manner' (Heron 1999:20). The aim is to integrate a genuine authority, as key researcher, with the autonomy of the participants as co-researchers. Thus, planning for the project involves a combination of decision-making processes by all participants incorporating hierarchy, co-operation and autonomy.

Liz: Now we know where you stand, what about the students you will be working with as co-researchers? How will their voices be positioned within this study and how will you represent them?

Jan: We are all aware of the tendency in mainstream education for the goals, needs and voices of Indigenous peoples to be largely downplayed or silenced. In this study I am asking students how the explicit and implicit ways their own voices on the one hand have been ignored and on the other singled out and patronised in equally oppressive ways during their time at university. By asking them these questions I aim to provide an opportunity for once muted voices to now be acknowledged and regarded on their own terms and in their own ways.

I have become aware that discourse on voice (and whose voice is valued) represented in critical pedagogy (Giroux 1988; Giroux and McLaren 1989) is wrought with difficulties; criticism being aimed at the encompassing modernist assumptions it makes grounded in certainty, abstraction and universalism (Lather 2001:191). Lather (2001:190) advocates a further deconstruction of theories in saying that it is within social practice that a reflection on conceptual frameworks can provide insight to multiple ways of knowing, which will no doubt create uncertainty but nevertheless, allow for more open dialogue and problem-solving existing in the present and operating in anticipation of the future. It is within such praxis, where rethinking established paradigms through challenging, disturbing and taking risks can become liberating for all participants, provided all voices are hearable and there is awareness of possibly slipping back into a prescriptive, universalising 'utopian consciousness' (Lather 2001:186). Within a universalising paradigm, marginalisation and its educational consequences are ignored or made irrelevant.

Indigenous Australian students live in a First World democratic country and yet historically, and many would say still, occupy a position of marginality within the Australian state and society generally. The sociohistorical position of Indigenous Australians, augmented by their low population ratio, places them as a dominated minority that could be likened to marginalised peoples in developing countries. Parallels can be drawn with marginalised peoples of other countries in that domination can promote a culture of silence in which Indigenous students within Australian mainstream education also experience either not being heard or their voices of resistance are extinguished by being made ineffectual. Shor (Shor and Freire 1987:123) calls this extinguishment 'symbolic violence', inflicted by institutionalised authority and based on manipulation and subordination. Unfortunately impotent resistance can become negative and aggressive with self-sabotaging results if unchecked.

In many cases of research with marginalised peoples there has often been a certain artificiality surrounding the liberatory notion of 'giving' voice even though intentions may have been principled. Hymes (1996:64) introduces the more complex idea of 'voice freedom' in which participants in communication move from merely having the opportunity to be heard to actually gaining satisfaction through the use of their voices; that is, they can be sure that others are actually listening and creating a genuine communicative relationship. The ultimate accomplishment would be the realisation

of a space where there are many kinds of voices joining in meaningful exchange of ideas.

Within certain environments, such as established institutions for example, this type of realisation may be regarded as simplistic or naïve. A two-dimensional model of speakers and listeners engaged in meaningful interaction must inevitably be influenced, or even determined by complex issues of power relations between participants based on differences such as class, gender, race, sexual inclination etc. Particular voices are acceptable, even valued, in particular roles, but not necessarily others (Hymes 1996:70). Regardless of how 'free' the participation space may appear or intended, there will always exist tension among participants, whether that is uncomfortable (negative) or comfortable (positive) tension. This is the social reality. Indigenous students as co-researchers can enact democratic rights by situating their experiences as the research problem and fight any previous 'culture of silence' (Freire 1974:13). If voice freedom can be enacted upon then there is the possibility of a certain interdependence of communication within social circumstances with a growing concept of creating one's own power. According to Freire (Shor and Freire 1987:109) that self-liberation can only be fulfilling when practiced as a social act, as in a group interaction where each participant holds responsibility for others.

I have found that a concern of culturalist leanings has been a reduction of good intentions to question and transform ingrained notions of culture within disciplines to mere discussions of the Other, often by predominantly White speakers, but also by Black speakers. McConaghy (2000:1) acknowledges Langton's (1993) work in 'open[ing] the way for working beyond the hierarchical racialised systems of knowing that are characteristic of Australian colonialism'. All too often critique of the Other confines itself to issues of race while ignoring or negating equally significant aspects of other areas of influence such as class and gender. Within such culturalist leanings of universalism and rationalisation Henry (2001:166) ponders the issue of marginalised people having to fit themselves into the views of scholars rather than viewing meaning and meaning-making from their daily lived experiences. hooks' (1990:133) postculturalist views encourage sites of meaningful contestation and constructive confrontation between all voices, while recognising that difficulties will arise due to a lack of 'common language'. However, she (1990:133) emphasises 'the importance of making space where critical dialogues can take place between individuals who have not traditionally been compelled by politicised intellectual practice to speak with one another'.

Differences between individuals are present regardless of any commonalities that exist among a given group of people. In the example of this project, a group of Indigenous tertiary students chosen randomly for a focus group discussion will have their Indigeneity in common but may have little else in common in terms of their backgrounds, affiliations and goals. The presence of any participants, including myself, who are not Indigenous confuses even the commonality of race and adds extra

sociocultural and historical dimensions to the dynamics of the group. Individuals bring with them to the discussion awareness of such diversity among *all* group members, which serves to dispel the notion of the binary Indigenous/non-Indigenous category in which either may be positioned as the Other. In the past, and in many cases still present, this binary notion has prescribed what is attached to each category representing each as unique, separate and oppositional in entity. As a result, discourse within the paradigm sets itself up to negate individuals' voices, those often being the voices of people already historically silenced. Persistence of a binary position in failing to recognise the complexities of all people's lives only serves to perpetuate the condition and prevent a moving forward in understandings and relations among people. However, Nakata (2000:ix) says that in challenging 'old discursive regimes' it is not necessary to erode 'the cultural, linguistic and political resources of Indigenous people.' The conducting of focus groups will give Indigenous students the opportunity to employ 'different intellectual theorisations of their position[s] in relation to all the discourses that intersect their lives' (McConaghy 2000).

Nakata (1997), in his experience as a Torres Strait Islander, dispels the simplicity of the 'them' and 'us' positions and describes an 'interface' between the two, a political space that circumscribes the ways in which Islanders make sense of and enact their lives. An opportunity to speak and be heard is supported by hooks (1992:116) and Foucault (1980) who advocate for possibilities of resistance in the form of developing agency within the power/knowledge struggle that takes place in such discourse. In providing an alternate space for voice freedom, all participants could have the opportunity to express themselves, which includes not only defending their positions but also making effective use of those opportunities for significant change. Mills (1997:52) examines such a space in the light of how students and teachers were able to create a 'disruption of normalising discourses' by challenging and changing socially unjust practices in a secondary school situation. Within a designated space, Indigenous students could perhaps negotiate those margins, gaps and locations where agency could be found.

Future Directions

Liz: How have the voices and representation of Indigenous students as co-researchers in focus groups given direction for future investigation of shifting subjectivities?

Jan: I would like to firstly emphasise that although issues of voice and representation are central to this monograph, those same issues remain pertinent when talking and thinking about political and social processes and stances throughout the explorations of the research agenda. The 'meaning' of what is actually happening within this research project in theory and practice is essential in examining how meaning is produced, how it circulates, and its negotiation, excesses, and articulations to power (Ellsworth 1997:10).

Thus, according to meaning-making stratagem, and initial examination of the field text recordings gathered in focus group discussions within the pilot study, certain themes are commonly emerging; such themes as perseverance, determination, struggle, and rewards of success and personal achievement. While continually re-reading the many hours of field texts there is an emergence of behavioural strategies in negotiating and dealing with a variety of 'situations' commonly appearing. These strategies, or communication practices, are similar to those described within the tenets of co-cultural theory (Orbe 1998) and include practices such as confrontation, avoidance, disassociation, increasing visibility, maintaining barriers and dispelling or embracing stereotypes.

'Co-cultural communication' (Orbe 1998; Stanback and Pearce 1981) is grounded in standpoint theory and acknowledges that people have specific societal capacity through the expression of lived experiences. Co-cultural communication then becomes a reasonable point of reference for interpreting field texts for this project. In simplistic terms, it refers to interaction between 'dominant' and 'non-dominant' groups; the latter groups being called co-cultures to signify the notion that no one culture in our society is inherently superior to other co-existing cultures. Interaction encompasses a variety of communicative practices that co-cultural group members engage in when interacting with dominant group members placing importance on the way those practices show active and adaptive styles of dealing with attempts to mute their voices. As an Indigenous female educator, Tripcony (1995:133) faced within the larger education system an underlying racist and sexist attitude however; through 'reassessing the process of change and possible methods of operation' she managed to negotiate the dominant group and framework while retaining her identity and integrity. Luke *et al.* (1993) outline how within past Australian government policy Indigenous status as a non-dominant group has been entrapped in a 'politics of representation' that sought to control discourses and institutional practices. It is only recently that there has been opportunity for Indigenous people to challenge and recreate their own discourses and practices within areas such as interdependent welfare services provision and the political goals of land rights.

Orbe (1998) has attempted to define these co-cultural practices, which can be used to help interpret lived experience, possibly shedding light on how Indigenous students negotiate subjectivities while achieving success at university. Individuals may use the proposed practices according to their preferred outcomes and communication processes to suit the circumstances of particular situations thus continually shifting their subjectivities. These practices show links to Indigenous Australian experiences existing within sociohistorical understandings of segregation, isolation, accommodation, integration, assimilation and resistance. A paper outlining such co-cultural behavioural practices has been given to the co-researchers for perusal and comment.

Within the research interpretations (Denzin 1989, 2001) of those behaviours identified in narratives of university experiences lay issues of Indigenous students' perceptions of motivation and achievement situated as on-going processes. How students navigate through, or whether students are conscious of these unfolding processes will be a point for investigation, particularly in consideration of student agency in post-tertiary futures on both personal and public levels. Too often achievement for minority students is classified in binary terms as uncommon success or predictable failure (Ekert 2002). Shifting the focus of the phenomena of Indigenous student success from extraordinary to ordinary has ramifications for future Indigenous students in seeing their hopes as pursuable objectives within dynamic, cyclical processes. Accordingly, *interpretation* of social meanings within the field texts, which signifies a multi-faceted use of field texts, becomes a more appropriate mode of investigation than the use of analytic processes found in many qualitative approaches. Interpretation recognises the *fluidity* of the texts and the inherent insecurity of the 'true' stories. Lather (1991:125) stipulates that the use of categories as provisional constructions rather than as systematic formulations shifts the focus to how field texts can complicate rather than impose specific meaning on narratives. While co-cultural social behaviours are being investigated, such exploration is based in a politics that wants other than to marginalise that which does not fit categorical unities that order and classify.

The method of focus group discussions may not only engage Indigenous students in the research process and product but also validating students' voices may play a role in helping to build new paradigms of social research and promote social change. I choose to believe there is an optimism in the possibility of such agency creating opportunity to also challenge and re-constitute discourse within existing paradigms thus revitalising existing meanings. McConaghy (2000:251) has questioned whether there will be any shifts in power relations in response to the challenging of discursive colonial structures in the creation of new disciplinary knowledges concerning Indigenous education. It is acknowledged that the students' voices may not all be heard or given equal weight and legitimacy according to the assertion of interests that the academy may regard as non-negotiable no matter what arguments are presented (Ellsworth 1989:302). However, the possibilities support the ideas intrinsic to co-operative inquiry (Reason 1994) that co-participants/co-researchers can be self-determining in their futures, if they are aware of the close relationship between knowledge and the positions in which their multiple experiences place their understandings.

Central and essential in applying political agendas to the critique of fostering student voice and representation are the questions of 'Critical of what, from what position, and to what end?' and 'How do our very efforts to liberate perpetuate relations of dominance?' These questions lay bare my position as a researcher who takes on board and believes that Indigenous students will be 'empowered by social identities that affirm their race, class and gender positions, providing the basis for moral deliberation and social action' (Ellsworth 1989:300).

My intention of instituting focus groups as a research method represents a forthright attempt to move critique from a universalising and rationalising process of theorisation to address political agendas; for example, the oppositional setting up of the irrational Other, inherent in practice. There is constant awareness on my part that concepts used in the discourse of this monograph (and the larger project), such as 'empowerment', 'student voice', 'student representation' and 'dialogue' can themselves become repressive and perpetuate relations of domination (Ellsworth 1989:298). There will always be a feeling of anxiety when working with interpretations of students' voices, and I consider this feeling as healthy and essential in moving toward ways of knowing which interrupt relations of dominance and subordination.

Liz: Has discussion with the students as co-researchers indicated possible related theory for critique?

Jan: In accordance with my methodological approach to research and considering the research questions concerning the negotiation of subjectivities, initial investigation of field texts collected during focus groups and discussion with co-researchers has indicated the appropriateness of theories of shifting identities within life experience. Consequently, I have been investigating areas of Indigenous Australian identity (Dudgeon and Oxenham 1990; Langton 1993; Oxenham *et al.* 1999), standpoint theory (Orbe 1998; Smith 1987), motivation (Weiner 1994) and success (Ekert 2002), and dialogics (Danow 1991; Shor and Freire 1987). Nevertheless, within the sociocultural context I remain open to other theoretical directions suggested by interaction with the co-researchers.

In collaboration with the co-researchers of the pilot study, the direction of further focus group discussions is under negotiation with consideration given to aspects of organisation, format and content. Preliminary consultation has favoured the conducting of various focus groups in 2003 with each group consisting of students at varying stages of their study programs; once again drawn from as many different schools and faculties across the university as possible. It is anticipated that this broad spectrum of communicative experience will enhance the collection of social meanings within the field texts.

Throughout the coming period continual appraisal of the process conducted in the research will remain pivotal in addressing the significance of participation in this project with regard to relationships between voice, power and knowledge in two ways. First, the questions initially encountered in self-examination were: Doing research for whom by whom? How is research conducted? Whose words are privileged within that research? The challenge of engaging with these issues is centred on two main areas for continual referral, which are inextricably linked when highlighting the importance of fostering Indigenous student agency within the university. Constant and meaningful communication must be maintained with the co-researchers with regard to the progress of the project.

Second, the voices in field text recordings (University of Queensland Indigenous Tertiary Students 2002) and discussions must be constantly revisited as the primary sources of information, thus not only continually acknowledging lived experiences as valid data but also, remembering that multiple meanings contained within stories remain fluid and therefore, interpretation might have to often be reassessed in view of that multiplicity. The field texts are used to display rather than analyse; to show demonstratively and performatively the creation of meaning from the lived experiences of the diverse peoples (Lather 1991:150). While continual reassessment of power relations and responsibilities remain of high priority, it must be remembered that often in post-times of widespread reflexivity, just getting on with it may be the most radical action one can take (Lather 1991:20).

To sum up then, although I feel that I have achieved direction in my project, I remain continually aware of the vast theoretical and pragmatic possibilities open to further my understanding. My 'interpretation' will be just one possible story emerging from the field texts with this journey of exploration being one in which all co-researchers operate within a three-dimensional sphere of relationships, time and space. However, here lies a danger, for in the nature of descriptions of lived experience and their interpretations becoming entwined, there is a possibility on my part of unconscious appropriation of Indigenous experience. According to Husserl's (1931) original phenomenological descriptions, *we can only know what we experience*.

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Glossary

field texts – replaces the term ‘data’, with the suggestion of conveying more fluid meaning for infinite interpretation

fluidity – variability, flexibility, changeability, uncertainty, even volatility

Indigenous – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia

Indigenous students – students who have identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders at time of tertiary enrolment

interpretation – multi-faceted, subjective, and more fluid than analysis which is often objectified and structurally-based

identity – viewed as singular and fixed

narrative inquiry – a dynamic process in which all participants enter into the living, telling and negotiating of stories within a three-dimensional space of relationships, time and place

story – expressed in the phenomena of lived experience

subjectivities – replaces the term ‘identity’ with an alternate meaning that is more suggestive of fluidity and multiplicity

success – program completion with underlying benefits and rewards as defined by students

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Appendix 1

Indigenous Graduates Pilot Study 2002-2003

Informal Invitation to Students

26 August 2002

Dear

You are invited to be a student participant in a research project being conducted in connection with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit exploring the meaning of 'success' for Indigenous students. Your involvement would consist of taking part in a small focus group, during September or October to discuss your experiences as an undergraduate student at the University of Queensland.

A more detailed formal letter is attached explaining the project.

If you think you might be interested in becoming involved, there will be an **Introductory Social Gathering** to give you the opportunity to find out more about the project, meet others who are also interested, and make a decision as to whether you would like to participate.

The gathering will be held on Wednesday 4 September, 1pm in Room 607 of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit, 6th Floor Gordon Greenwood Building.

You are still welcome to join the research project if you are unable to attend the Introductory Session.

Some refreshments will be provided.

RSVP Liz Mackinlay or Jan Stewart
Phone: 3365 6712
e.mackinlay@atsis.uq.edu.au s347406@student.uq.edu.au

... or just turn up.

There is no obligation; we would love to see you.

Appendix 2

Indigenous Graduates Pilot Study 2002-2003

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

Indigenous Graduates Experiences of 'success' at the University of Queensland: A Pilot Study

Our names are Dr Liz Mackinlay and Jan Stewart and we are undertaking research as part of an examination of course completing Indigenous students' experiences of 'success' at the University of Queensland. This research is being conducted as part of doctoral research being undertaken by Jan Stewart through the Graduate School of Education in association with Dr Liz Mackinlay at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at the University of Queensland.

The research will be conducted during September and October 2002. Participants will be required to partake in group discussions, and possibly one-to-one interviews, to discuss perceptions and opinions about their experiences of success in tertiary education and the relationship of this 'success' to Indigenous identity. Each discussion will be audio-taped for interpretation purposes. All participant responses will be anonymous if desired.

Participation in this research project is voluntary and participants are free to withdraw at any time. The data collected from this project will be housed initially in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit and upon completion, archived in the Fryer Library of the University of Queensland. A report on this research will be written and it is anticipated that some of the findings from the research will be published in scholarly journals. For this purpose, the identity of participants will not be disclosed.

If you have any questions or concerns about this project, our contact details are:

Dr Liz Mackinlay
ph: 07-3365-6712
email: e.mackinlay@atsis.uq.edu.au

Jan Stewart
ph: 07-3341-9497
email: s347406@student.uq.edu.au

Alternatively, you may wish to contact the Director of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit:

Mr Michael Williams
ph: 07-3365-6699

Appendix 3

Indigenous Graduates Pilot Study 2002-2003

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I hereby declare that I understand that participation in the research project will be voluntary and that my identity will remain anonymous.

I am free to withdraw from the research project at any time without being compelled to stay.

I understand that the information I give in this research project on the Indigenous graduates experiences of success at the University of Queensland will be used for study purposes, and that it may be published in report, book, or journal article form, but that my identity will never be disclosed unless formal permission is granted.

Participant's signature:

Date: ___/___/___

Appendix 4

Indigenous Graduates Pilot Study 2002-2003

Discussion Guide for Focus Group – September/October 2002

Listed below are some questions that may help you in thinking back over your university experiences. Would you please consider these in preparation for the focus group discussion. You will not necessarily be asked these questions directly but they may give you a guideline to offering your story in our conversation. You may wish to express yourself in a different way; e.g. with the help of an artwork or poem to assist you.

1. What made you decide to come to university?
What steps did you take to get here?
What helped you to choose UQ?
2. What was important to you about succeeding and finishing your program?
3. What do you think has helped you to succeed?
Can you name your personal qualities that have helped you to succeed?
Do you think you have acquired any particular skills while at university to help you succeed?
4. What was an enjoyable experience you have had at university during your program?
5. What was an unpleasant experience you had?
6. What is/was it like being an Indigenous person in this university environment?
7. Please think back to those experiences, and choose a couple that you feel have either directly or indirectly had some effect on your success?
 - Have there been any instances you can remember where you had your identity challenged, either directly or indirectly?
 - Could any of those instances have negatively affected your success? (or degree of success?)
 - How did you react to these instances to achieve a positive outcome for yourself? i.e. Did you resist or conform or manipulate the situation, outspokenly or internally?
8. Which situations (or what type of situations) did you feel more comfortable in, and develop confidence in handling?
9. What contacts did you make at university, group or individual, that you found helped you to 'fit in', that is, made you feel comfortable, welcome, able to make friends?

Appendix 5

Indigenous Graduates Pilot Study 2002-2003

6 March 2003

Dear

This is just a letter as a follow-up to the focus groups we had last semester. I hope you received the copy of your focus group transcription that I sent to you at the end of last year. If there is anything that you would like to add since your session, please contact me, as your contributions are valued.

As part of the methodological process of your participation as co-researchers in the project, I would like to get your views on how you feel the focus groups satisfied the aim of gathering university experiences. Points to consider might be:

1. Did you feel comfortable participating in the session?
2. Did you think that the make-up of the group worked well, or otherwise e.g. group size, age, gender, program type and stage of completion?
3. Were the questions clear and appropriate in gaining a clear understanding of how you negotiated your identity in university experiences?
4. What other questions do you feel would be helpful?
5. Do you think that an optional one-to-one interview held after the focus group session would be appropriate and helpful to cater for those who would prefer a different process?

Rather than trying to organise a meeting of everyone who participated I thought it would be more convenient, and equally suitable, to telephone you instead within the next week or so. Would you mind thinking about these questions, and anything else that seems pertinent, to discuss when I call.

Thanking you for your valuable contribution to date, and in anticipation of your on-going participation.

Kind regards,

Jan Stewart
email: s347406@student.uq.edu.au