

TOWARDS AN ETHICAL DISCOURSE IN USING LIFELONG LEARNING SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE: FINDINGS FROM THE EDUCATION OF UNIVERSITY BRIDGING STUDENTS AND SHOW PEOPLE

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*For ALLAN R. PIKE,
who embodied a lifelong love of learning
and an honourable commitment to ethical conduct*

ABSTRACT

This paper responds to Jarvis's (2000) call for a focus on the ethical dimension of lifelong learning discourses. Mant's (1999) distinction between binary and ternary interactions suggests one way of making lifelong learning more ethically grounded. We relate this argument to the education of university bridging students and show people.

INTRODUCTION

This paper extends an earlier account (Coombes, Danaher, Anteliz, & Danaher, 2000) of the lifelong learning experiences of Australian mature-age, university bridging students, and show people, and the implications of those experiences for a generic skills approach to lifelong learning. The paper responds to Jarvis's (2000) call for greater attention to be paid to the ethical dimension of lifelong learning discourses. Specifically, the authors consider the form and likely significance of an ethical discourse about these two groups using lifelong learning skills to maximise their futures.

Following Jarvis's (2000) lead, the paper focuses on both groups of learners as incarnations of 'the Other' (Bauman, 1993; Levinas, 1991) whose existence reflects both the power and the ethical responsibility of 'the Centre'. The bridging students who complete the STEPS (Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies) program at Central Queensland University are 'other' to conventional university students who follow traditional pathways of academic success from school to university. The mobile show people are 'other' to permanent residents in fixed locations. For both groups, this 'othering' renders them less powerful, and hence less able to take advantage of lifelong learning opportunities, than their logical opposites.

The authors argue that an ethically grounded approach to these two groups of learners, using

lifelong learning skills for the future, demands a recognition of, and an engagement with, the broader structural conditions that construct their 'otherness' in relation to 'the centre'. In particular, we draw on Mant's (1999) distinction between binary and ternary interactions to suggest some features of the "alternative discourse" on lifelong learning called for by Jarvis (2000, p. 26). The significance of this ethically informed discourse is nothing less than the provision of meaningful and empowering educational experiences for two groups of traditionally marginalised learners, whose futures would otherwise be diminished and impoverished.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Peter Jarvis (2000) used his keynote address at the inaugural international lifelong learning conference to outline his call for lifelong learning academics and practitioners to focus attention on the ethical dimension of lifelong learning. This call derived from his assertion that "learning is amoral in itself" (p. 20) because it is inevitable – "Because we are alive, we learn" (p. 20) – and from his corollary claim that "what we choose to do with and how society seeks to control our learning, are much more problematic" (p. 20).

For Jarvis, that "control" is increasingly exercised by global corporations implementing the goals of late capitalism. Such goals are far more about maximising profits for shareholders

than about extending the range of workers' life experiences. Nevertheless, for the system to operate effectively workers need to believe in at least the possibility that their "work-life learning" (p. 24) might become genuine lifelong learning. For this to occur, the discourse of lifelong learning has been hijacked by corporations and been converted into the 'soft language' of terms such as 'empowerment' and 'opportunity'. According to Jarvis: "...business and industry have captured the language of lifelong learning and have the power to frame the discourse" (p. 25).

In Jarvis's view, his argument that lifelong learning is the servant of a global capitalism that enriches a very few at the same time that it impoverishes the very many has crucial ethical implications. He claimed that "the only universal moral good...is that it is never wrong to be concerned for other people" (p. 26). He cited Levinas's (1991) assertion: "Discourse is...an original relationship with exterior being" (p. 66). Furthermore he cited Bauman's (1993) contention:

"Moral behaviour is triggered off by the mere presence of the Other as a *face*; that is, an authority *without force*. The Other demands without *threatening* to punish, or promising rewards. The Other cannot do anything to me, neither punish nor reward: it is precisely that weakness of the Other that lays bare my strength, my ability to act, as responsibility. (p. 124; cited in Jarvis, 2000, p. 26; emphasis in original)"

We find persuasive Jarvis's argument that the ethical dimension of the lifelong learning discourse demands greater attention than it has received to date. We endorse further his encapsulation of that dimension in the fundamental and eternal relationship between 'the centre' and 'the Other'. At one level, that relationship – which has ethical responsibilities precisely because it is politically unequal – is focused on the interactions between the powerful lifelong learning knowledge producers and the less powerful knowledge consumers. Yet, as we outline below, applying this analysis to groups of specific lifelong learners demonstrates that the relationship is considerably more nuanced and subtle than the preceding sentence suggests.

To be more specific about this last point, as we have outlined in an earlier paper (Coombes, Simpson, Danaher, & Danaher, 2001), Alistair Mant (1999) used the terms binary and ternary to develop his hypothesis of intelligent leadership, and these terms can be equally

applicable to the field of education. Binary is characterised by interpersonal influence and usually results in a win-lose situation – for example, lifelong learners are automatically and always disenfranchised in comparison with knowledge producers in global capitalist contexts. Ternary was coined by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson and describes three-cornered relationships. Here the winner, the one who comes out on top, will be the product, purpose, ideal or outcome, rather than the protagonist or antagonist. Thus in a ternary situation knowledge producers and consumers are able to work together for a common purpose and productive learning will become a common goal.

The significance of Mant's distinction between binary and ternary interactions is that it provides us with a conceptual means of moving beyond the undoubtedly useful but ultimately limited and limiting analysis of lifelong learning understood from an essentialist and fixed perspective as powerful production and powerless consumption. That is, we contend that both the groups of learners discussed in this paper demonstrate considerable dynamism and fluidity in their educational experiences, by moving outside and across the spaces of educational provision in learning journeys that can potentially bring them enhanced identity, meaning, and power. This is the crucial implication of ternary interactions: the prospective disruption of the binary between 'the Centre' and 'the Other'. Such a disruption is, of course, far from easy, but it is more likely to occur if the broader structural conditions underpinning the construction of otherness are acknowledged and contested. These processes of acknowledgment and contestation are, we insist, the true basis of an ethical dimension of the discourse of lifelong learning.

UNIVERSITY BRIDGING STUDENTS

There is nothing new about the concept of 'the Centre' and 'the Other' in relation to learning. Back in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when 'proper' education was reserved for the elite, it was the power forces of 'the Centre' (the politicians, industrialists and clergy for example) who decided who could be designated as elite, a decision that was usually based, consciously or unconsciously, on social class or wealth. In educational systems learning was controlled by 'the Centre' (administrators and teachers) while the students were taught what was deemed to be in their best interests. In the early twenty-first century in Australia,

significant changes have occurred. The blurring of class distinctions and the extension of educational opportunities to all, regardless of wealth, race, or gender, has meant that, in theory at least, tertiary education is available for anyone. Even those who, for whatever reason, were unwilling or unable to undertake undergraduate studies when they were younger can opt for a second chance at university entry via a bridging program such as STEPS.

In many ways, STEPS students can be regarded as typical examples of 'otherness' within an academic institution. The university world is for them, when they first arrive, so utterly foreign as to resemble another country where they are totally unfamiliar with the language and customs. Many of them have very little confidence in their abilities to cope with a bridging program, let alone complete an undergraduate degree. After all, earlier educational experiences have often been far from rewarding for them – the reason why they might have left school as soon as the law allowed them. They are usually economically disadvantaged, surviving as well as they can on government assistance. They are in many cases much older than the so-called traditional university student. These factors can exert a strong influence on their attitudes towards learning.

While this 'otherness' can be perceived and acknowledged, on closer examination it can also be contested. The unfamiliar milieu soon becomes familiar, and after a six month bridging program, STEPS students are far more aware of the university environment, culture, and discourses than are the young first-years, straight out of school. Similarly, as they become familiar with the skills required to research and produce an academic assignment, for example, their confidence and self-esteem will improve. Economic difficulties may continue to be a fact of life, but at the end of the program they can discern the possibility of greater financial rewards and opportunities. The age barrier is, in fact, less problematic as – currently – mature-aged students are in the majority at Central Queensland University. Finally, most STEPS students have an asset that they may not recognise, a strong commitment to learning. Thus the whole issue of 'otherness' is less definitive and more nuanced than might otherwise be expected.

This leads us to the issue of 'the Centre' so far as it exists in an academic institution. Where does the power reside? Apart from the hierarchy of

tutors, lecturers, support staff, professors, and administrators, with the Vice Chancellor at the apex, the university is also in many ways subject to external forces including, as Jarvis (2000) contends, those of global capitalism. To some extent, some form of power and control must exist and can be accepted insofar as it provides a stable structure and works along ethical lines. However, when 'the Centre' operates at the expense of rather than on behalf of 'the Other' (in this case the students) its ethical qualities must be in question.

Is there a possibility of meaningful discourse between 'the Centre' and 'the Other' in the quest for effective lifelong learning? Mant contended that the answer lies in relinquishing binary interactions with the inferences of conflict: winning and losing, control and submission; in favour of a ternary relationship. Here a third element is introduced, a common cause that should, by its very nature, unite 'the Centre' and 'the Other' in a shared endeavour. In the case of the STEPS students, the purpose of encouraging them to undertake undergraduate studies provides them with a range of educational opportunities while at the same time increasing student numbers and enhancing the collaboration between the university and the community. Thus 'the Centre' and 'the Other' can both benefit from a shared purpose, and the binary opposites can give way to ternary cooperation. While the teaching staff must still make important decisions about the most effective ways for the learning process to take place, and while the university administration will still be responsible for the structure of the institution, it is still possible for the STEPS students to express their own ideas and opinions as they grow more experienced in the ways of university life. They can become an integral part of the ternary interaction (Mant, 1999), so that the dichotomies between 'Centre' and 'Other' can change for the better.

The implications for the future of lifelong learning are significant. STEPS students are encouraged to regard their educational experiences as a journey. Quests and odysseys have enjoyed a resurgence in popularity as a result of the current fascination with J. R. R. Tolkien's (1994/1954) *The lord of the rings*, both in written and in cinematographic form. Like the Hobbits, incarnations of 'the Other' are ordinary little people, apparently powerless, but capable of overcoming tremendous odds with the help of more powerful forces. Thus the STEPS students, aided by their mentors, can continue on their journey to achieve

undergraduate, and in some cases postgraduate, degrees. They can become familiar with academic discourses and learn to discuss and question issues with their tutors and lecturers in a way of which the great Greek teacher and philosopher Socrates would have thoroughly approved. 'The Centre' and 'the Other' can gain understanding of and learn respect for each other as the learning journey continues.

When Jarvis advocated a focus on the ethical dimensions of lifelong learning, he would seem to be arguing in favour of the best possible outcomes for both students and those who share with and guide them on their educational journey. Learning in itself, as he stated, cannot be unethical, but the controls imposed by the university and by the larger community can be. Care is taken within the STEPS program to foster an environment of mutual respect, and the teachers have discovered to their joy that they can learn much from their students. There is evidence to suggest that this relationship can and does continue as the students move on into their chosen faculties where most have few reservations in engaging with their tutors and lecturers on equal terms (Coombes, Simpson, Danaher, & Danaher, 2001). However the situation is more problematic when power is exercised by a faceless 'Centre', such as global corporatisation. When learning is regarded as work-life rather than lifelong, and when it is evaluated in terms of profit and loss rather than as a liberalising process, enriching in itself, then the barriers can be very difficult to overcome, and the stigma of 'otherness' can recur.

In advocating "an alternative discourse of lifelong learning" Jarvis (2000, p. 6) was suggesting a difficult, but not impossible, undertaking. STEPS students are engaged in a transitional learning process, but if during this period they ('the Other') can achieve effective communication and engagement with the authority of the university ('the Centre'), then the development of a ternary relationship in the future is a possibility.

SHOW PEOPLE

The show community has been configured as peripheral and peripatetic. In modern Western societies, ethics have been tied to the notion of a civic society and civil order. In this context, notions of permanence and stability have been central to practices of governance. Civil institutions emerged from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that attached the concept of ethical behaviour onto values such as self-

discipline, temperance, respect for the rule of law and civic responsibility.

From this perspective, there has developed an official culture of suspicion and ethical policing directed towards those who transgress this 'proper' order of settlement. For example, over recent times in Australia, the official government approach to refugees and asylum seekers has been to frame them within discourses of threat and moral uncertainty. Certain arms of the media have been complicit in this process, such that a policy called the 'Pacific solution', in which refugees have been deflected to peripheral and impoverished island nations, has been in place.

Yet this process of 'othering' peripatetic and floating populations is uncertain and ambivalent. 'The other' is as much configured as an ally as it is presented as a threat. Governments such as Australia, present the forces of globalisation – shadowy corporate interests that circulate chaotically throughout the world via computer screens and media images – as fundamental to domestic economic salvation. And certain other peripatetic groups, such as the show community, are endorsed on the basis of their symbolic ties to traditional values grounding the wellspring of the nation (Danaher, 2001).

Nor is the response of 'the Other' to 'the Centre' simply one of opposition. For all that they are configured as 'Other', a peripatetic community such as the show people understands, and to some extent accepts, that their interests and livelihood are tied to, and fashioned within, practices organised at 'the Centre'.

What we can see is a tension between attempts by the proper and central order of governance to capture and settle the floating 'Other', on the one hand, and attempts by this 'Other' to evade such capture, while at the same time availing themselves of resources such order of governance provides. This game of attempted capture and resistance is ongoing and always in motion. To take a metaphor drawn from another floating population, fish, it might be said that show people are keen to feed off the burly but not be hooked by the bait.

It is in terms of this constitutive tension that we might locate the move from a binary to a ternary relationship. That is to say, rather than configuring the relationship between the central apparatus of educational governance and the floating 'Other' of the show community simply in terms of rigid binary oppositions, it is more productive to locate this relationship, at least in

part, in terms of a ternary or triangular relationship in which the third point represents the space of creative conjuncture between these two spheres. This third space (Soja, 1996) is where 'the Centre' displaces its attachment to fixed orders of settlement and rather engages with the flow and fluidity of a more peripheral life experience. The educational experience that emerges is one attuned to the perceptions and routines of a floating population whose members simply cannot accommodate their lifestyles within fixed temporal or spatial orders. In return, the central government gains by having provided educational opportunity for a community whose work helps to sustain the life of rural and regional areas marginalised (that is, rendered peripheral) by that same government's attachment to the global forces mentioned above.

As with the STEPS students, the show people have an opportunity – owing partly to their own endeavours and partly to the preparedness of 'the Centre' to listen to their concerns – to use their lifelong learning skills to maximise their futures. This reflects the operation of an ethical discourse about lifelong learning that downplays the latter's potential to ensnare peripheral and peripatetic communities such as the show people and that highlights roles and responsibilities for helping to ensure their empowerment. A key feature of those roles and responsibilities is that they are mutual: agents of 'the Centre' have a responsibility for recognising and valuing the show people's lifelong learning, just as the show people have a responsibility for taking up the opportunities offered by lifelong learning. This is the ethical implication of focusing on ternary rather than binary interactions between 'the Centre' and 'the Other'.

CONCLUSION

Jarvis (2000) concluded his analysis of the ethical dimension of the contemporary lifelong learning discourse by calling for "an alternative discourse" (p. 26) of lifelong learning. He outlined four key features of such a discourse, that it is:

- really about lifelong learning and not work-life learning (however important that might be),
- about people and not profits,
- about enriching people rather than utilising human resources,
- about responding to needs and not meeting targets (p. 26).

What has our application of Mant's (1999) distinction between binary and ternary interactions to the educational experiences of university bridging students and show people to say about Jarvis's suggested "alternative discourse" about lifelong learning? On the one hand, hopefully this paper has demonstrated the fruitful application to two diverse groups of lifelong learners of Jarvis's paired categories, so that for example focusing on "people and not profits" (p. 26) takes on particular meaning in relation to both the STEPS students and show people. On the other hand, the paper is also intended to illustrate that a conceptual framework based on paired categories is both limited and limiting, because it does not readily encompass a movement outside the binaries underpinning those categories.

By contrast, both groups of lifelong learners considered here reflect crucial and fundamental movements outside and through the spaces of formal educational provision. The STEPS students have moved into an arena – university education – that they would not traditionally have entered, and consequently they are helping to challenge and change the constituent elements of that arena (Coombes, Simpson, Danaher, & Danaher, 2001). Similarly, the show people routinely move in and out of physically resident communities and leave them subtly altered as a result, just as they have transformed the shape of Australian schooling provision (Danaher, 2001). In both situations, enduring change has been an outcome of conceptualising interactions between 'the Centre' and 'the Other' in ternary rather than binary terms (Mant, 1999). All of this underscores the urgent and ongoing need for an ethical discourse about lifelong learning to act in concert with a deeply embedded recognition of, and engagement with, the broader structural conditions that have constructed 'the Centre' and 'the Other' in the first place.

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