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ABSTRACT

The issue of how the outcomes of research on vocational education and training (VET) are influenced by categories that frame thinking about research and learning was explored. Special attention was paid to the following issues: (1) the role of researchers' culture and race in identification of adult learning principles; (2) the need for researchers to pay more attention to the notion of whiteness as a way of exploring how researchers' culture and race shape their production of knowledge about VET and how whiteness shapes the development of social and public policy statements, curriculum documents, and other VET texts; and (3) the fact that many white people erroneously assume that nonwhites experience whiteness in much the same way as whites do and that many whites are therefore unable to see the effect of their whiteness on the subject of adult education. It is argued that, despite the difficulties inherent in undertaking contemporary studies about whiteness, VET researchers should write into adult education a more explicit examination of whiteness and its effects. More work is called for on the effects of whiteness as a "discursive system of pressures and constraints" on what can be achieved by programs underwritten by theories and principles formulated by whites. (Contains 20 references.) (MN)

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Racialised discourse and 'adult learning principles': some thoughts about difference and VET

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> Living in a nation of people who decided that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom *and* mechanisms for devastating racial oppression presents a singular landscape for a writer. (Morrison 1992, emphasis in original)

This 2001 AVETRA conference with the title *Research to reality: putting TVET research to work*, indicates the purchase binaries have on the way researchers write about educational matters. Titles like this are not uncommon for conferences, yet they are suggestive of a number of tensions inherent in educational work – the presumed separation of theory and practice, the disarticulation of thinking and working, the difference between the researched world and the real world, and the implicit claim that the real work of education occurs at the interface between educators/trainers and learners.

I begin this paper with this perspective to remind me that 'invisible' binaries are always already present in the work 'we' produce as vocational education and training (VET) researchers. My intention is not to dismiss the importance of categories, nor the very different contexts of industry and academic sites as workplaces. Rather, I want to explore how the outcomes of research might be influenced by categories that frame thinking about research and learning.

A second purpose of this paper relates to the notion of 'practice' in VET. In this paper I move away from the immediate domain of 'classrooms' to explore another form of practice that I call scholarly practice. My interest is in exploring how scholarly practice - that is, the production of knowledge about VET learning - establishes the conditions under which that learning becomes thinkable.

To ground this discussion I begin by calling on a number of terms that have a familiar ring where VET texts (policies, research reports, program statements and so on) are concerned: access for all, investing in people, equity and diversity. However, rather than starting with these terms, I want to return to the work of Toni Morrison (1992, p xiii), whose words open this paper, to ask: How does the contemporary landscape of 'individual freedom and ... devastating racial oppression' shape the possibilities for access and equity in VET texts? In my view this work is important not as a reason to dismiss issues of access and equity. Rather, it is important as a way of understanding how the racialised worldviews invoked by Morrison become so tightly sutured into understandings of 'adult learning' that it has become well nigh impossible for many (White) educators to see their presence, or feel their effects on the way notions of access, equity, investment and diversity are understood.

The writing landscape invoked by Morrison provides one avenue for beginning a conversation about researchers as particular kinds of practitioners involved in producing adult learning theories. Morrison's work also provides a means of

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exploring the links between these ideas when one begins from the assumption that adult learning principles might not be as benign as many authors suggest.

In large part I undertake this work in the spirit of forging an indisputable link between teaching and theorising; a link that can be characterised by the term 'thinking-work'. Yet, beginning this debate is at times almost paralysing, as the conceptual tools required to think change are so bound up in existing modes and practices that an entry into the debate via 'thinking' and 'theory' rather than 'doing' and 'practice' seems to reinstantiate the very binaries I have been trying to disrupt.

Where does one start?

Dominant discourses and 'adult learning principles'

For many years now, a generic notion of 'adult learning principles' has guided work related to adult learning across many contexts and content/knowledge domains. Calls for clear writing and accessible theory are common and they coexist with demands for self-direction; transparent describable experience; reflective practice to know the self; the demand for relevance to the everyday; and a belief that knowledge is generally neutral and benign. These expectations provide templates for contemporary policy development that aims 'to instil within the Australian community and enterprises a desire to acquire [valued] skills ... and to engage in lifelong learning' (Australian National Training Authority 1999, p 1). These 'adult learning principles' exemplify dominant discourses about adult learning, which claim to span context and content even though they clearly produce different effects across and within contextual and knowledge domains.

But dominant discourses also do more than this. Besides circumscribing a form of normative practice that is expected of adult education activities -*and literature about those activities* - the discourses also provide the ground on which it is possible to argue for a generic form of adult learning and make no reference to the differentiation in a learning group. These mooring points of adult learning that I have described above are constituted through discursive practices of (neutral) facilitation, (neutral) classificatory systems of knowledge, and transparent awareness of a self that bears few marks of a gendered or racialised nature; a self whose (hetero)sexuality is assumed.

I have begun the task of challenging these assumptions by suggesting that researchers pay more attention to the notion of Whiteness as a way of exploring how 'individual freedom *and* ... devastating racial oppression' guide the hand that underwrites 'adult learning principles'.[1]

Understanding Whiteness: examining the specificity of the mainstream

In many educational contexts the term mainstream is used as a code word to signify what Audre Lorde has called the 'mythical norm' (Lorde 1984, p 116). However, the term mainstream has the tendency to obscure the complexity of ways in which White people live their lives, and at the same time it does not address the issue of 'unearned privilege' from which many White people benefit (McIntosh 1988).

Richard Dyer notes that many people believe that racialised lives belong to non-White people, and that White people are not raced (Dyer 1997). As a result, some discourses about adult education disguise the normative effects of Whiteness - as they claim to speak for all humanity - and it is these discourses that are more often than not exemplified by the claims of 'adult learning principles'.

Moreover, for Dyer, dominant representations of Whiteness are, in part, expressed through paradigms of embodiment that are intricately connected to Christianity. In scientific discourse, the (White) subject seeks to attain a 'position of disinterest – abstraction, distance, separation, objectivity – which creates a public sphere that is the mark of civilisation ... the aim of history' (Dyer 1997, p 39). Christianity encourages the disembodied notion of the White 'subject without properties' (ibid, p 38); a subject throughout history that has, nevertheless, still needed to be visible. This disinterest is accomplished in a number of ways. The Christian separation of mind and body provides the means by which we think; 'the trope defining [White] bodies with control and [Other] bodies without' (ibid, p 18). 'Above all, the white spirit could both master and transcend the white body, while the non-white soul was a prey to the promptings and fallibilities of the body' (ibid, p 23). It is precisely this confluence of discourses which circumscribes how Whiteness comes to have particular meanings and representations; its conditions of intelligibility.

These views about Whiteness are quite different from those ideas that describe culture and race in adult education. For Dyer:

> White identity is founded on compelling paradoxes: a vivid corporeal cosmology that most values transcendence of the body; a notion of being at once a sort of race and the human race, an individual and a universal subject; a commitment to heterosexuality ... a stress on the display of spirit while maintaining a position of invisibility; in short, a need to always *be everything and nothing*, literally overwhelmingly present and yet apparently absent. (ibid, p 39 – my emphasis)

It is therefore, not surprising that 'enterprise' forms such a major part of the modernist project of training/lifelong learning. Nor is it surprising that the qualities of 'enterprise' and 'leadership' have been subsumed under taken-for-granted understandings of historical progress that conflate these qualities with inherent assumptions about the destiny of Whites to rule.

For many White people (and indeed many non-White people) concerned about tackling these issues through the lenses of access, equity and diversity, the only representations of Whiteness they can conjure up are those associated with White superiority and White supremacism. Hence, as Dyer points out,

> [t]he combination of extreme whiteness with plain unwhite whiteness [i.e. people of color] means that white people can both lay claim to the spirit that aspires to the heights of humanity and yet supposedly speak and act disinterestedly as humanity's most average and unremarkable representatives. (Dyer 1997, p 223)

In this instance, extreme Whiteness becomes the 'condition of establishing whiteness as ordinary' (ibid, p 22). Hence male or female colleagues and learners who bully, harass or intimidate will rate as extreme, while liberal educators with the best of

intentions are framed as 'trying' and therefore untouchable in terms of reflexively analysing 'our' practices.

These extreme understandings and representations of Whiteness are crucial to establishing parameters for ordinary, responsive Whiteness (Dyer 1997) and, in my view, the latter provide the scaffold for a wide range of contemporary social and public policy statements, curriculum documents and other VET texts. They do this in part by repeated reference to and recycling of the features that define the boundaries of 'adult learning principles'.

Making Whiteness tangible

Alice McIntyre also investigated the issue of Whiteness when she worked with preservice teachers to explore their beliefs and practices about Whiteness and its effects in school settings. Her study (McIntyre 1997) identified a number of practices that exemplify the ways in which student teachers in preservice courses blocked more comprehensive discussion of Whiteness and its effects. In her study, 'white talk' acted as a 'relay' (Bernstein 1996) for power-knowledge relations in education. McIntyre's research provides concrete examples of the ways in which

> "white talk" serves to insulate white people from examining their/our individual and collective role(s) in the perpetuation of racism. It is a result of whites talking uncritically with/to other whites, all the while, resisting critique and massaging each other's racist attitudes, beliefs, and actions. (McIntyre 1997, pp 45-46)

This 'white talk' has a visible dimension in group sessions conducted by McIntyre, including

> derailing the conversation, evading questions, dismissing counterarguments, withdrawing from the discussion, remaining silent, interrupting speakers and topics, and colluding with each other in "creating a culture of niceness" that made it very difficult to "read the white world" (ibid, p 46).

Marilyn Frye's (1983, 1992) work provides earlier examples of this, reminding me that Whiteness is not really a new research field. Concerned feminists and others have been talking about Whiteness and its effects for decades. Frye comes to terms with the seemingly fugitive nature of Whiteness, for some people at least, by returning to the field of language. In my view, this is not a bad thing, as her attempts to portray 'whiteliness' provide some concrete comparisons with gender equity, an idea that is familiar to many VET educators. In Frye's view 'whiteliness' is akin to masculinity, a contingent connection that is not dependent on a White skinned body (just as being masculine is not contingent upon the male body). In making this connection, Frye claims that issues of morality and social change are central to what she calls 'Whitely' ways of being:

> Whitely people generally consider themselves [sic] to be benevolent and good-willed, fair honest and ethical. The judge, preacher, peacemaker, martyr, socialist, professional, moral majority, liberal, radical, conservative, working men and women – nobody admits to being prejudiced, everybody has earned every cent they ever had, doesn't take sides, doesn't hate anybody, and always votes for the person they think

> best qualified for the job, regardless of the candidates race, sex, religion or national origin, maybe even regardless of their sexual preferences. (Frye 1992, p 154)

Frye uses grammar and analogies with feminism and class to address, but not reconcile, potential contradictions between representations of Whiteness and fluid conceptions of subjectivity that will, at the same time, not dissolve the power-knowledge relations of the space that is Whiteness. For Frye 'whiteliness is [not] just middle-class-ness misnamed' (ibid, p 159). This is a claim offered by many, which in my view dismisses the effects of the 'White in the I'; the stable subject of adult learning that seems to guide so many sets of principles, guidelines, suggestions for facilitation and so on.

While I am concerned to keep a focus on the fundamental organising principles that make Whiteness such a powerful system of discursive pressures, like Frye and a number of other researchers, I also think that located analyses of Whiteness must show the extent to which gender, sexuality and class become something else when 'saturated' (Spillers in Davy, 1997) with Whiteness. This is an important issue. For White people the transformations achieved through educational activism may be important. For people of colour, the change may be imperceptible given the overall effect on how they experience Whiteness. In fact, the perspectives of non-White people have been notoriously overlooked in many studies about access and equity - and it is this feature of some strands of studies about Whiteness that promises much for rewriting adult learning principles in ways that acknowledge the racialised effects on theory building.

Looking at Whiteness: 'other' perspectives

Many White people make the assumption that non-White people experience Whiteness in much the same way as 'we' White people experience it. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (1998), Jackie and Rita Huggins (1994) and Lillian Holt (1999) point out that Indigenous Australians have been watching White people for years - as Indigenous servants, 'anthropological subjects' of research, and learners and workers in education settings. In doing so, they have learnt much about Whiteness and it is not always what 'we' imagined or desired that they would learn. bell hooks believes that many White people are unable to develop the capacity to see and know Whiteness; that Whites know nothing of those pressures and constraints that produce White subjectivities. She contends that as White people we only know how to talk about ourselves by talking about the Other. Such comments are reflected in a long-standing tradition of social inquiry that variously describes White people's ambivalence toward, lack of knowledge about - and even distaste for - our own culture.

hooks stipulates that 'looking' for/at the Other is a practice that must cease:

> I am waiting for them to stop talking about the "Other", to stop even describing how important it is to be able to speak about difference. ... Often their speech about the "Other" is a mask, an oppressive talk hiding gaps, absences, that space where our words would be if we were speaking, if there were silence, if we were there. ... Often this speech about the "Other" annihilates, erases: "No need to hear your voice when we can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your

> story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority, I am still the coloniser, the speaking subject, and you are now at the centre of my talk." Stop. (hooks 1990, pp 150-151)

In addition Toni Morrison's writing shows that Whiteness is made through the Other, and therefore requires some understanding of how the Other is constructed through the racialised practices of production that generate (VET) texts. In recent research (Shore 2000), I work with the challenge of foregrounding the discursive practices of Whiteness and am also mindful that a category like Whiteness does not appear of its own volition. It is constituted by and through the debates and practices of otherness that are invoked by terms like access and equity; debates and practices that are paradoxically designed to address inequalities produced by the constitution of otherness.

Starting somewhere: strategies located in theories and contexts

In this paper I have noted how 'difficult' it is for some White people to see how Whiteness has an effect on the subject in/of adult education. In 1988 Peggy McIntosh published a discussion paper (which has seen many forms of publication since then: 1988, 1990, 1992) elaborating on the different forms White privilege might take. After an analysis of some 40 privileges she has noted in her own life, she eventually rejects the word 'privilege' as being woefully inadequate to describe the unearned resources which many White people accumulate. Yet she 'forgets' that her 'brutally honest' list of White privileges comes from a comparison of the White self and the *lack* or deficits she implicitly reinscribes on the Other (see Hurtado and Stewart 1997, p 305 for discussion of this point).

McIntosh's protocol for recognising Whiteness and the critique offered by Hurtado present an exemplar of how difficult it is at times to see the 'White in the I' (Shore 1997) that guides assumptions about the self. Some White writers are unaware that they write from a position that takes as its norm a White self. Other writers suggest that the Other needs to be present (that is, programs need to be designated for particular 'target groups') if the power relations of racialised lives can be examined. These writers are unable to move beyond the notion of visible otherness (non-Whiteness, for example) to see that Whiteness, too, is a form of 'difference'. And yet it would be too easy to fall back on the claims for differentiation and diversity and thereby ignore the very real economic and political differences that Whiteness makes to particular lives.

In exploring this work I am mindful that starting somewhere is not a neutral enterprise (Spivak 1993, p 58). In my view, contemporary studies about Whiteness are fraught with difficulties – not least because they require educators who would identify as 'White people' to explore and understand something that many of 'us' take for granted. Moreover, when Whiteness is viewed as a discursive 'system of pressures and constraints' (Said 1993, p 323) that frame the design of access and equity programs, then it would seem to me that more work needs to be done on the effects of these pressures and forces on what can be achieved by programs underwritten by a theoretical hand that promotes liberation and ignores the oppressive aspect of its history.

In this paper I have responded to the exhortations of recent policy documents that imaginative new ways of rethinking work, learning and training are required if industrialised countries such as the UK and Australia, to take two cases, are to make a difference to individuals and enterprises. My response, as a researcher deeply concerned about contemporary theorising in VET, has been to move away from the imperatives of lean and efficient methods of training and the discourses of productive citizens that are so common in VET policy and research. The ideas I have developed in this paper are evocative of work in other areas of education, which suggest connections between the repetitious recycling of seemingly neutral principles about adult learning and the ongoing continuities and solidarities of White power imbricated in wider practices of colonialism and imperialism.

In my view the ideas presented in this paper are unlikely to find their way into core training programs as an alternative to 'adult learning principles'. However, they do provide one starting point in the development of a dialogue about 'social change' that might help to explain why access and equity strategies have limited potential for structural and pedagogical change. And they offer one means of examining how VET researchers might write *into* adult education a more explicit examination of Whiteness and its effects.

Note

1. In other work (Shore 2000) I have noted the importance of examining Whiteness in contextual and contingent ways, of learning to see variety in context and, at the same time, of mapping the recurring effects of Whiteness across contexts in ways that render visible - to White people at least - a sense of the effects described by people who experience this Whiteness in bureaucratic systems. These 'Whitefella systems' also have masculinist features that differentially alienate many White people as well; thus Whiteness is not always 'privileged'. Nevertheless, White people operating in these settings often benefit from the repertoires and practices present in these systems (Frankenberg 1993). My more extensive research attempts to deal with this problem of recognising Whiteness, yet not reifying it as some kind of static identity category; a common feature of texts exploring identity from the perspective of 'adult learning principles'. Hence both men and women take up Whiteness and its diverse masculinist versions in Australian institutions, at the same time as they are also contested, adapted and differentially experienced by employees.

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