The 2017 AERA theme is Knowledge to Action: Achieving the Promise of Equal Educational Opportunity. How does your scholarship align with the 2017 AERA meeting theme?

I preface the remarks below, with the observations that it is very difficult to know what influence one can claim for “work,” whether it is through research and publication, or sustained teaching and learning with pre-service teachers, research students, and professional development work with teachers and colleagues. Therefore, it may be more honest to consider the contexts in which some of the work took place and what changes have occurred in those contexts over time. The other certainty is that if one lives long enough, one is likely to develop a more critical perspective on some of that work. Therefore, the responses to the questions below offer some of those reflections, rather than any certainty about what influence my work may have had.

Early in my teaching career, I joined the examining panel and the multiple choice test construction team for the English Tertiary Admissions examination in Western Australia, Australia. The primary function of the course was to serve as an entry pathway to university studies for the 12% (approximately) of the age cohort aspiring to university studies.

I later served as Chief and Supervising Examiner for the same course. From the early ‘80s, it was apparent that the candidature had changed markedly to include a significant number of candidates for whom English was a second language, as well as a broader representation of the age cohort for whom the course contributed to completion of secondary schooling. Successive examiners recognized the cultural disadvantage inherent for ESL candidates in texts selected for the reading comprehension papers and in composition topics for extended writing.

This is where the need for a change was identified. The cumulative recommendations for a less culturally bounded course for ESL candidates were successful in establishing a new course. My doctoral study on variant readings of short fiction in four culturally differentiated groups confirmed examiners’ disquiet and argued the case that multiple choice tests of reading comprehension also discriminated culturally rather than intellectually. Subsequent
changes reflected commitment to equal educational opportunity.

Thirty years after introducing changes to successfully address these discriminatory testing practices, a new national literacy test has been instituted in Australia as a gate-keeper to secondary school graduation over-riding results in English courses at the same level. The sample test items offer a good fit for students from middle class white communities, but show little evidence for awareness of other cultural experiences. Definition of “literacy” through the socially constructed practices of the dominant group reactivates discourses and practices of exclusion from educational and employment opportunities of young people whose cultural heritage or social and economic histories differ. The consequences may be that far from enacting the rhetoric of “closing the gap,” such practices may exacerbate the sense of alienation and loss of hope for marginalized groups.

Given your work on the notion of negotiation and your work on citizenship education, what do you see to be some important contributions of these works to the field of educational change?

Citizenship education can be regarded as moral technology to promote shared national values that inform those attitudes and behaviours regarded as norms of civil society. Multicultural or pluralistic societies may produce ethical dilemmas for teachers in selection and mediation of texts for a culturally diverse classroom community. As previously argued (O’Neill, 1999) teachers need to be aware of the consequences of particular text selections and of occupying particular reading positions to ensure that students understand their agenda in promoting culturally critical reading practices.

Given my view that inclusion of controversial texts for the purposes of reasonable discussion is justifiable, I was unprepared for the critique offered by a student in my pre-service education class. The Guardian newspaper pulled together oppositional discourses composed from words and phrases used in media reports on the first Gulf War (1991) comparing the opposition forces pejoratively with “our boys” in the Allied forces. I thought that I had introduced the text carefully as an example of the ways in which discourses could be used to marginalize, ‘Other’ or demonize for the purposes of valourizing engagement in the war and generating a sense of national pride. My more general point was that as preservice teachers, the students should be aware that discourses, which may seem invisible or ‘normal’ can be offensive or hurtful to some of the students in their future classrooms. A female Iraqi student took me to task during and after the lecture for failing my own criteria, as she said that she found my use of the text to be hurtful and offensive and that I should not use it in future.

The Australian Racial Discrimination Act (1975, 18C) makes it unlawful (although not criminal) to commit an act in a public place that is “reasonably likely, in all the circumstances, to offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate another person or a group of people.” Protection is afforded under Section 18(D, b), in which anything said or done ‘in the course of any statement, publication, discussion or debate made or held for any genuine academic, artistic or scientific purpose or any other genuine purpose in the public interest’ is not rendered unlawful. Other clauses cover making or publishing a fair comment on any event or matter of public interest if the comment is an expression of a genuine belief held by the person making the comment (18D, c, ii). Thus, my text selection in the above context could not be deemed unlawful. Nonetheless, under Section 46P of the Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986, people may complain to the Australian Human Rights Commission about unlawful acts. Alleged perpetrators can
be required to engage in mediation and if resolution acceptable to the plaintiff is not achieved, they may sue through the court system. Costs of defence are borne by the perpetrator, without recompense should the action fail or be withdrawn before a court hearing occurs. In 2016, a number of cases unlikely to succeed due to exclusions under 18(D) were listed for hearings, incurring considerable expense and distress for the accused, before being withdrawn. In some ‘mediation’ processes, it was made clear that financial recompense for the ‘offence’ suffered by the plaintiff would prevent the charge from being pursued through the courts.

Clause 18(C) has been described as ‘bad law’ and may come under Parliamentary review. Currently, it may best be viewed as an example of subversion of good intentions to protect interests of marginalized groups of citizens. (Its application was cited recently as possible protection for LGBTI citizens from potential abuse in public discussion of a plebiscite to legalize same sex marriage). Increased cultural diversity can lead to marginalization of groups regarded as minorities. Seeking a balance between honouring cultural difference, protection of the interests of marginalized groups and recognizing the values that must be shared in a cohesive functional community seems essential to maintaining civil society.

Within this context, the potential threat of court action, in combination with professional desire NOT to cause distress to students, may cause teachers to avoid controversial issues—including discussion of current events—that would be pertinent to citizenship education. However, culturally critical practices do need to engage with real world issues, to examine the consequences of taking particular positions and not merely be playful pluralities produced for academic engagement. As part of the civil contract, citizens must be free to engage in genuine discussion without the threat of punishment or litigation. Silencing those discussions whether by self-editing or public censorship of divergent voices cannot produce a healthy and informed citizenry.

Given your focus on education in general and cultural criticism in particular, what would be some major lessons we can learn from local and global educational changes?

Resource materials developed with Bronwyn Mellor and Annette Patterson (1987, 1991) were designed to promote culturally critical reading practices in secondary school English classrooms. The texts were all originally written in English, but from diverse sources outside the British canon. Classroom activities were deliberately planned to disrupt predicted dominant readings and to require students to consider alternatives. We assumed that these stories would be accessible (with some mediation) to most students in increasingly diverse secondary school classrooms in Australia, which seemed to be supported by their continued use over a period of more than twenty-five years. They also appeared to travel well internationally, being taken up and reproduced for the American market through NCTE. Globalization in educational practices suggests that texts and textual pedagogies are increasingly portable.

Choo (2011) proposes a Cosmopolitan Literature curriculum which “begins with one’s own tradition and perceives the new through the lens of one’s culture” (p. 63) that will be gradually transformed through openness to the influence of others. Choo argues that a Cosmopolitan Literature curriculum balances an instrumental value with an ethical, moral dimension, providing a clear vision and goal for the acquisition of literacies, literacy, communicative, and other skills associated with literature education. Such a goal supposedly transcends race, class, nation and other imagined boundaries. Loh (2013) details ways
in which increased access to texts of all kinds offers opportunities for readers to develop a global literary identity—openness to literature from a wide range of sources, engagement with perspectives of multiple and divergent readers. However, her research indicated that only privileged Singapore boys with access to resources beyond school developed flexible literate selves that they were able to deploy for school purposes and their own interests, “plugging into global notions of literacy relevant to international markets in their localized context” (p. 53) and she concluded that the global identities of the boys could not be separated from structures of class.

These two studies re-framed my past and recent transnational literary experience in different ways. Research leave in Canada exposed me to regional literature to which I had not previously had access. Reading MacNeill’s (1978) short story anthology made me aware that my cultural shortcomings caused me to miss a deeper level of engagement with the stories. Concomitantly, Grade 12 Canadians who were asked to read an Australian short story commented that they lacked the cultural and historical framework that would allow them to engage with the study in an informed way (O’Neill, 1999).

Recent experience of professional development seminars in cross-cultural contexts reminded me that culturally critical approaches to texts may be no more universally transferrable than “right readings” of literary works. In 2015, I developed culturally critical workshop materials on Vivien Alcock’s story “A Cinderella Girl” for teachers working with SPM literature students in Sarawak. Among my assumptions (faulty or otherwise) was that such students would be familiar with a standard version of “Cinderella” and that feminist reading practices would be transferrable to the Alcock story.

Reviewing study materials available on the Internet suggests that my reading of the story was not a widely shared approach in Malaysia and lead me to question my assumptions (retrospectively, unfortunately). Reactions to second wave feminism are indicators that while cultural criticism may be a global phenomenon, its application must be grounded in the local context, rather than airlifted in from other cultural frames of reference.

Young people (students) are the focus of educational change for improvement. From your perspective, what are the key needs of young people at this time and what might the field of educational change prioritize in order to meet these needs?

The economic and employment destabilization of the twenty-first century so far, suggests that ensuring access to appropriate educational pathways for young people, offering flexible pathways and opportunities to keep them engaged in education, and creating awareness of opportunities beyond school seems the minimum requirement. Many schools in Australia are offering students opportunities to complete technical and vocational qualifications as well as achieving university entrance qualifications. Despite this increased flexibility, it seems to me that education systems both at school level and beyond are still preparing students for twentieth century employment expectations and that for many (including university graduates and postgraduates) it seems that their hopes of stable full-time employment in the fields of their expertise, are endlessly deferred, along with prospects of home ownership and raising a family. Accompanied by economic exclusion and lack of foreseeable opportunity to participate in community and economic life, it may contribute to alienation and radicalization, which seem to be major threats to civil society.

Young people will need resilience, adaptability, capacity to assess their own capacities objectively, and the capacity to seek
out opportunities and potential collaborators as small business and start-up companies seem increasingly likely to offer the flexibility that young people will need. Increasing hybridization across educational, vocational and employment spheres seems inevitable. The challenge is to manage all of that while maintaining recognition of cultural knowledge and values that promote citizenship and humanity.

What do you think are the most important issues in educational change today? What excites you about the educational change field today?

Equity of access and opportunity. I see this as an extension of the previous question. The promises associated with the technology revolution (as yet unfulfilled in Australia) are not equally distributed, but if fulfilled, they have the potential to give young people access to ideas, to opportunities and connections with like-minded potential collaborators and colleagues anywhere in the world. Curriculum adaptations, which encourage transnational projects (already undertaken in a number of schools through Global Learning Alliance, for example) can broaden students’ knowledge and skills bases and help them to develop global connections that are recognized in formal assessment practices.

The challenges lie both in promoting flexibilities in the formal education systems and in helping young people to develop judgement and critical awareness as well as generosity of spirit to negotiate the potential pitfalls that may lie in their way. The greatest challenge for education and the economy at large is to ensure that what was glibly referred to as “the digital divide” does not translate into permanent disadvantage and alienation of large sectors of young people for whom access to global cultural capital is not forthcoming.

References


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