Intellectual Decolonisation and Philosophies of Knowledge Transfer

The conceptual range of human potentialities and happiness has shrunk. While consumerism has widened our choices in trivial matters, conformism has narrowed our choices in vital matters. We have more shampoos and cuisines to choose from; we have few options in matters such as visions of a good society and a healthy person. Our journey through the twentieth century has created the conditions for a drastic abridgement of our ideas of dissent and diversity, too.

(Nandy 2007, p. 15)

Research questions and objectives

This research project is primarily concerned with the question “What kind of philosophies of knowledge transfer can inspire and inform intellectual decolonisation and re-orientation in Australian education?”. Further questions concern the types of spaces in which intellectual decolonisation can occur, the role of the educator in a decolonising learning environment and the processes by which different philosophies may be respectfully engaged.

There are several core objectives that underlie this investigation:

• Firstly, the project will engage with and analyse recent debates and discussions around intellectual decolonisation, specifically as it applies to those nations of the English-speaking world which are a product of settler colonialism. Of particular interest will be the role played by different philosophies of knowledge transfer in sustaining or undermining a supportive educational climate for intellectual decolonisation. In this context, “philosophies of knowledge transfer” are understood as the underlying principles, processes and values of pedagogical practices.

• The second objective of this project is to ground the above theoretical analysis in the praxis of decolonising education. I intend to achieve this by drawing on the lived experience and work of educators and students grappling with intellectual decolonisation in different “settler societies”. I am particularly interested in how these teachers and learners critique and construct pedagogical practices and evaluate their capacities for alternate meaning-making processes.

• Finally, the project seeks to link the insights gained about the philosophies and practices of intellectual decolonisation with an analysis and critique of Australian education, especially in relation to current pedagogical practices in its universities. This “sharp edge” of the project will allow for an ethical intervention into an increasingly instrumentalist discourse and open up this field to further discussion and exploration.
Significance
At a time of continual crisis – be it social, ecological, humanitarian or economic - the limited horizon of Western philosophies of knowledge production and knowledge transfer is increasingly exposed and its hegemony challenged from a variety of theoretical and phenomenological perspectives. Formerly colonised peoples the world over as well as many critical voices within Western nations are rejecting the ongoing intellectual heritage of colonialism as much as its political and economic ramifications. Yet compared to other former colonies in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, the project of intellectual decolonisation in Western “settler states” such as Australia has so far largely evaded sustained scholarly scrutiny. In a twenty-first century where Australia has to come to terms with the pressing challenges of, among others, fundamentally reassessing its relationship to Indigenous Australia, its long-term environmental future and its geographic reality as part of Asia, this can no longer be ignored. In order to grapple with the complex challenges of an increasingly interconnected world, it is necessary to investigate the philosophical conditions that enable a more lateral and polyvocal engagement with other ideas and practices.

Background
Intellectual decolonisation entails a re-evaluation of Western epistemological foundations – philosophies and processes for creating and transferring knowledge – in former colonies such as Australia. Going beyond basic elements of legal and political decolonisation, it includes a serious challenge to the invisible “colonial grammar”, the everyday taken-for-grantedness of limitations which frames the dominant society’s horizon of knowledge and understanding. It is a necessary element for other forms of decolonisation to occur. As Mamdani (2004, p. 6) puts it:

We have learnt through experience that political decolonisation cannot be complete without an intellectual paradigm shift, which is what I mean by intellectual decolonisation. By ‘intellectual decolonisation’, what I have in mind is thinking the present in the context of a past. Unlike radical political economy, though, the past needs to be thought through deeper than simply the colonial period.

The idea of intellectual decolonisation was brought to the fore by the work of Edward Said and later the subaltern studies group (Ballantine 2001). It has since been taken up by theorists in Africa, Asia and the Pacific who argue that decolonisation has to go beyond a handover of power to a re-evaluation of fundamental societal processes and mechanisms (Kabutaulaka 1994; Laenui 2000). It has also been used by predominantly indigenous authors in “settler states” to challenge epistemological hegemonies and as a rallying cry for revitalising and maintaining indigenous knowledges (Battiste 2002; Meyer 2001; Smith 1999). In postcolonial theory, finally, it has been strongly linked to emancipatory writing and the study of literature (Dees 2005).

In terms of its relevance to non-indigenous populations in “settler states” such as Australia and its particular relationship to philosophies of knowledge transfer, however, intellectual decolonisation has not been fully explored. What this project thus proposes is an in-depth theoretical and practical study of decolonising pedagogical practices and their implications for Australian education.
Furthermore, going beyond a challenge to and critique of the status quo, the project is interested in intellectual reorientation, epistemological regeneration and innovative teaching practices. While much of the literature on post-colonialism focuses on disrupting Western preconceptions with literary interventions by the subaltern (see Gandhi 1998), the question of what comes after the critique remains? As Luke (2004, p. 252) notes,

In the face of new and difficult material conditions, the educational production of critique and deconstruction is necessary but not sufficient for broad secular education systems faced with the task of opening up new life pathways and social futures.

What epistemological and pedagogical tools are available to dismantle entrenched hierarchies of power and not merely cope with multiplicities of knowledge, but thrive and grow on the enmeshment of diverse ways of being, thinking, understanding and acting? How can intellectual decolonisation revitalise and transform teaching and learning at Australian universities?

**Methodology**

Due to its interdisciplinary nature and its concern with the meaning people inscribe into their educational experiences, the proposed research project is best located in a cultural studies methodology. Cultural studies research allows the researcher to draw on an eclectic mix of primarily qualitative methods to explore the context and content of meaning that human beings attach to their material, social and environmental conditions. Like other qualitative research paradigms, cultural studies methodology is predicated on a view of reality as socially and culturally constructed as well as historically, materially and discursively sited (Saukko 2003).

Informed by its overarching methodology, the proposed research will take the shape of a sustained critical theoretical analysis grounded in a series of case studies which examine decolonising pedagogies in action. This praxis-based approach is more productive in educational inquiry than either purely empiricist or purely theoretical research (Chambers 1992; Thomas 2007). Discussing the dynamic reality of decolonising pedagogies taking place in various nooks and crannies within different education systems, Luke (2004, p. 253-54) notes that

... however theoretically vexing it might appear, [this] is also a moment where teachers and students, scholars and civil servants working within these educational systems stitch and suture together answers, however provisional and local, on a daily basis. It is the empirical and interpretive study of their work, its consequences and effects that should be the focus of postcolonial educational studies and beyond.

There are four major aspects to my methodological approach to the proposed research project. Firstly, in order to create the philosophical framework to make sense of the lived experience of educators and students grappling with intellectual decolonisation, I plan to develop a rich theoretical basis for my investigation by drawing on recent developments in postcolonial theory, cultural theory and historiography. While specifically locating my study in an Australian context, I plan to draw strong theoretical connections to other “settler states” as well as other former colonies.
Concurrent with developing this theoretical framework, I will work on identifying suitable sites for case studies. Ideally, I would like to undertake these case studies in select locations in Australia, Canada and Aotearoa/New Zealand. This is because all three countries are former English colonies, have recently generated substantial literature on postcolonial education, and would provide a comparative dimension not available in research focusing on particular countries alone. In each location, I plan to do both semi-structured, open-ended interviews with educators and students as well as engage with pedagogical practice as a participant-observer.

A third methodological aspect of my proposed research is its inevitable interfacing with my own undergraduate teaching practice at university. I see this interfacing as being a rich source of generating additional layers of meaning and thus necessitating a self-reflective methodological component. I plan to use a blog to capture these self-reflections, as, compared to a journal, it is more interactive and allows other select users to comment and thus collaborate with me in further articulating, developing and refining any emerging ideas.

Finally, I plan to integrate a regular dissemination, discussion, examination, probing and evaluation of my findings into my methodology. This will most likely take the form of a series of regular roundtables and seminars with colleagues from SCU and other universities. These roundtables and seminars would function both as a theoretical clearing house as well as practice-based action-research. This represents another innovative collaborative dimension to my research methodology.

**Timetable**

The following is a draft timetable of research progression. I intend to also draft more detailed annual and quarterly plans.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Frame</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 2009</td>
<td>Commencement of candidature</td>
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<td>March 2009 – August 2009</td>
<td>Relevant training and skills update</td>
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<td>March 2009 – August 2009</td>
<td>Literature review</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 2009 – February 2010</td>
<td>Identifying sites for case studies</td>
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<td>September 2009 – February 2010</td>
<td>Full research proposal</td>
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<td>September 2009 – February 2010</td>
<td>Confirmation of Candidature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2010 – August 2010</td>
<td>Ethics application</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 2010 – August 2010</td>
<td>Preparation for field work</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 2010 – February 2011</td>
<td>Field work</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 2011 – August 2011</td>
<td>Data analysis and writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 2011 – February 2012</td>
<td>Editing and revision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2012</td>
<td>Submission of thesis</td>
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References


