

Re-imagining Citizenship: views from the classroom

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What is citizenship?

- What are your views?
- How does your interpretation of this concept impact your teaching?

Introduction

- Citizenship is a powerful notion that includes and excludes. This a timely examination – Australia is in the grip of debates about who belongs here and why.

Citizenship and dis-citizenship

- we explore the highly contested notions of citizenship and dis-citizenship through the experiences of teachers and learners in four very different classroom settings:
 - a vocationally oriented class for speakers of English as an additional language (Priya),
 - a numeracy class for adults (Ann), and
 - a flexible learning centre for adult basic education students (Tania)
 - a literacy and numeracy program for young people disengaged from learning (Jean and Peter)

- We show the teacher's role as pivotal in creating a collaborative space where the society's power relations are acknowledged, but where students' agency to achieve their own goals in and beyond their classrooms is affirmed and addressed. We argue that teachers can work with their learners to create these new spaces of belonging and being.

Background to this presentation

- Writing about citizenship
- Context: citizenship test proposed in 2007. What did this test look like?
- Today I opt to discuss and showcase pedagogies that include rather than discriminate or impose a particular way of seeing the world.

Indigenous Australia and citizenship

- The current Labor government, while not publicly pursuing such an overtly assimilationist agenda as the previous government, has maintained a watered down version of a citizenship test and in its paternalistic management of Indigenous communities has suspended human and land rights legislation and has maintained control of day to day running of once independent Aboriginal communities.
- colonisation has been a major force in determining whether people belong or not; for example Australian Aboriginal people were not recognised as Australian citizens and included in the census until 1967; this is another, if not the main feature of our context.

- While these issues are of utmost concern to us and underpin the fabric of Australian society, our purpose in this paper is to critique assimilationist policies through the lens of adult learners' experiences in LLN classrooms and to show ways that classrooms can become sites of dynamic citizenship.

Discourses of citizenship and dis-citizenship

- citizenship is not only a noun but a practice inseparable from the broader societal power relations which position people in a society
- Devlin and Pothier (2006) dis-citizenship as applicable to people with disabilities, who because of not being able to meet the supposed criterion of ‘capacity to participate or be productive’ are denied access to society’s institutions and rights, and consequently they cannot claim their status as citizens

Third space – the classroom as a productive space of citizenship

- Guttirerez (2008) and Moje et al (2004) discuss the need for teachers to create a ‘Third space’ that enables learners to negotiate their experiences of the institutional space and their lived experiences in their communities, as a way of increasing academic engagement and learning.

The classroom sites- particular policy and learner contexts

- Priya, an ESOL teacher, found herself working in an increasingly vocationally focused environment where language and literacy teaching and learning was integrated into the teaching of vocational knowledge and skills.
- Peter and Jean, literacy and numeracy teachers, were working with people who are often spoken about as ‘at risk’ students in a community youth centre. Here they were involved in team-teaching as a way to provide greater degrees of responsiveness to learners with multiple learning needs, and working with volunteers who provided further support and enabled each learner’s individual goals to be negotiated and achieved.

- At the third site, the teacher, Ann, was clear in her philosophy of teaching. She showed that teaching was about knowing and responding to the learners' individual goals and needs. What was specified in the syllabus was important, but it had to be balanced against the needs and abilities of the learners.
- Tania teaches in a Flexible Learning Support Centre where she facilitates and mentors students to accomplish and complete their courses.
- In all four sites the teachers demonstrated how they were attuned to the changing circumstances of their learners, how they gained, a sense of (a particular) reality.

Creating spaces for citizenship

- *‘Never feel scared or worried or not confident of seeking clarification because that’s the best way you’re going to learn. It’s better to ask than to do something wrongly because you are learning.’*
- *As one student explains to us that, When I don’t understand something – a word, a situation, the teacher can explain in very detail to us – very, easy to understand.*
- *And another student says about Priya and Ann: They listen to us patiently and attentively, encourage discussions listen and encourage us to express our opinion. The students draw on and learn a repertoire of practices in Priya and Ann’s class. One student says that in the course, she is learning: Australian culture, English and how to get a job.*

- The learner, Oman, is a refugee from Guinea-Bissau who had settled in Australia and is now involved in developing his English language and literacy and numeracy. Oman talks about how the learning in this class and the people are so important for him. He says:
- *My classmates [are] really friendly person[s] ... they [are] very good people. So since I come to this class I meet all these people - like so good for me. Like three months, something like that, but I'm getting really better for reading and writing and I know these people they're my friend when I come to school I'm happy you know. So it's quite nice. It's very nice.*
- and adds:
- *... everywhere you go, you need people Now I'm here like five years, nearly five years in Australia. I didn't come here with my family with my mum and dad and brother and sister. I have to make my own friends.*

Bridging dis-citizenship

- The teachers both acknowledge that they *‘do need to be aware of the social world they are coming from because that’s what is really impacting on their learning’* (Peter, Outreach teacher).
- Peter (the Outreach teacher) was keenly aware of how the program needed to differentiate itself from formal schooling: *‘I think one of the key ingredients for maintaining the program has been not to come with a model that has failed them before, such as a typical school model.’*

- *My awareness of the Chinese culture, the Indian culture, other cultures has helped me greatly. When I teach the language aspects, I can always relate them to the cultural aspects. ... We have actually seen them grow a lot. The language is taught, I encourage them to use it.*
- Thus among the learners who one student describes in the following way:
We have different clothes, food, languages
- The teacher's acknowledgement and efforts to turn the classroom space into an affirming, supportive space results in one student being able to say:
We are like a family.

Building bridges to new conceptions of citizenship

- The ABE class consisted of five men and one woman who the teacher, Ann described as being very weak in their literacy and numeracy skills, some with mild learning difficulties, and who had experienced disrupted school learning.
- Ann - response to what she was learning about her learners: *The main thing really is to know my students, to really know and understand where they're coming from, what their learning difficulties are, where their weaknesses and their strengths are.*

The flexible learning centre

- Ben, a young man in his early 30s is keen to talk openly about how the centre has provided a liberating opportunity, at first he describes what he hopes being able to spell will allow him do and feel: *‘through all the years of not being able to spell it would just be a luxury to be able to write what I think’*.
- He later repeats that his learning of this skill will be able to (gestures to his head) *‘get the thoughts from here to on paper’*, he is smiling and clearly says this in a way which signifies some enormous change for him. He also addresses the way the centre and approach of the teacher Tania, has developed his own sense of agency in undertaking this work.

Conclusion: Creating spaces for reconceptualising citizenship

- We have highlighted four teaching contexts which we regard as examples of where teachers are pivotal in creating spaces for learners to reconceptualise their sense of place and belonging.
- The learners in these examples may otherwise be characterized by dominant discourses, defined in assimilationist and economic productivity terms, as deficient in key citizenship skills.

- We pose this question: Why can't this process be replicated in the wider community? Why can't citizenship be more dynamic and responsive to the changing demographic and cultural mix in society - a collaborative and cooperative project.
- Teachers, educators and policy makers are in a prime position to challenge and make changes to how notions such as citizenship maintain the power to exclude and assimilate. The teachers whose classrooms and practices we have studied exemplify this role of teachers.

- Thank you.