Social ecology and creative pedagogy: using creative arts and critical thinking in co-creating and sustaining ecological learning webs in university pedagogies

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Introduction

 "A big wind blows for everyone who's in their first year of uni[1]" the student calls out, standing in the centre of the circle of seated students, including me.

Some of us jump from our seats and run across the circle, racing for the just vacated chairs. Gales of laughter fill the room as two students vie for the same chair, one gives in and a new student stands in the centre.

She calls "A big wind blows for anyone who speaks another language besides English" again some of us leap from our chairs racing for the just vacated chairs.

"Hurricane" shouts the new centre person and we all leap up bumping into each other in our rush for a chair.

And so the game, "A Big Wind Blows" continues for a time, each person choosing something they'd like to find out about the group. The bare walls of the classroom hum with our laughter. The game closes and we settle back in our seats laughing - with some apologies again to those we've bumped in our rush for seats.

"Okay, so what's going on in that game? What do you notice?" I ask.

"Well we get to find out about each other."

"It's fun."

"It got my heart racing."

"We all got to have a turn."

"There were no winners or losers."

"Well … it got me out of my comfort zone. I didn't leap up for a while until I saw that there wasn't a right or wrong in the game"

"I didn't like being in the centre"

"Didn't you, I did?"…

"Great observations" I respond. "So, how might that game relate to the unit we're here to explore? Where does a game like this fit in to learning and creativity? Let's apply theory to what we've just experienced."

And so the conversation begins in the first Tutorial of the 100 Level Unit *Learning and Creativity* in the School of Education at the University of Western Sydney, New South Wales, Australia (University of Western Sydney, 2007).

My teaching and research practices centre on applied creative processes and cultural action (Camden Pratt, 2007, 2006, 2002; Horsfall *et al*., 2004) and foreground critical thinking (Freire, 2005; 1970/1996; Giroux, 1994; Hickling Hudson, 2004; hooks, 1994; Gore,

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1   'Uni' is an Australian colloquial abbreviation of 'university'.

1993; Whang & Waters, 2001) using a social ecology framework (Bateson, 2000; Bookchin, 2005; Capra, 1997, 1996; Hill *et al.*, 2004). I frame student and teacher agency within a context of critically reflexive personal and academic rigour. This article discusses selected aspects of my pedagogies and their theoretical underpinnings using examples of unit content, assessment examples and student feedback from the 100 level undergraduate unit *Learning and Creativity* (University of Western Sydney, 2007), which I have taught for four years.[2] This unit develops applied understandings of the inter-relationship between learning and creativity, critical and creative thinking and creative arts skills within a social ecology framework. It is characterised by experiential learning. Students experience and apply a variety of creative arts approaches, which ground and explore unit theory, facilitating new ways of expressing critical reflections. They work with critical autobiography, as an approach to working with unit material. In this way individual biographies become community biographies - the personal becomes political and theorised (hooks, 1984; Lather, 1991). In their critical reflections students are encouraged to understand feelings and experience, as well as concepts and ideas, as a way of developing agency in their personal and professional lives. Through unit pedagogies the unit becomes a site that "brings people together … to talk, exchange information, listen, feel their desires, and expand their capacities for joy, love, solidarity, and struggle" (Giroux, 1994. p. x).

In this article I am writing to know (Richardson, 1997) - taking an opportunity to explore my pedagogical praxis, which as feedback from students consistently demonstrates, facilitates engaged critical and deep learning[3]. I'm interested in how pedagogies using applied creative arts and critical thinking including critical autobiography enable these kinds of learning. While my thinking is referenced where relevant, there is much I have learned through my praxis and in this I am my own authority.

Social ecology applied: ecological learning webs, risk taking, vulnerability and trust

I lecture in Social Ecology. Most people ask, "What's that?"

I respond, "Well, it examines the inter-relationship between the personal, social, the environmental and the spiritual/unknown"

"Yeah, but what does that really mean?" is usually the next question.

"Basically it acknowledges that everything you and I do affects our personal wellbeing, that of others, future generations and the environment (University of Western Sydney, 2006). Umm, if you see each of these areas – the personal, the social, the environmental, and the spiritual – as separate circles which overlap in the centre it makes the centre a powerful place. And each of us is in that circle – in/formed by our social relationships acting in specific environments with personal worldviews. So if you act from a critical awareness of this inter-relationship then your actions have the capacity to facilitate change in the area where you'd like to see change happen – personally or in the community, locally or globally. It means that when I teach at university, the student is placed right in the centre of her/his own learning in a

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2   Although my focus in this article is on one unit, I apply similar pedagogies across all my Postgraduate and Undergraduate teaching.

3   University generated unit feedback data (SFU), anecdotal evidence, student conversations, formative and summative unit feedback, and lecturer observations of student learning, student testimonials and emails. In 2006 and 2007 this unit received the highest positive scores in the newly instituted SFU in the School of Education and The College of Arts. In 2007 I received a College of Arts award for Excellence in Teaching. Writing to know about my own pedagogies risks a heroine narrative – I can only acknowledge this and note that it is an unstable narrative, which rests within my application of critical theory.

critically reflective way – it's about *their* learning – and of course I learn too because I'm learning alongside them, so it's always different because all students are different."

"That sounds great!"

"Yeah, I love my work" I say and smile.

In order to examine the inter-relationship between the individual, society, the environment and the spiritual/unknown, social ecology draws from a variety of disciplines. These disciplines include: humanities; psychologies (including eco-psychology and Jungian psychology); sociology; environmental studies; ecology; chaos and complexity; education (including transformative education); creative arts (including visual, written and performing arts); and spiritual disciplines including theology. As already said, it places the individual in the centre of their own learning and foregrounds their learning agenda. This means that the student directs his/her own learning within unit content which is critically positioned within diverse theories and across the above disciplines. Applied social ecology challenges him/her to critically reflect on and theorise about the inter-related processes of learning and creativity and the application and practice of these in all aspects of life – his/her own as well as in various social, political, cultural and environmental sites. Social ecology promotes agency in personal and cultural change and facilitates this through experiential learning.

Each year I participate in awe as I witness time and again the co-creation of an ecological learning web and its rich emergent learnings in a large student group drawn from a variety of undergraduate degrees - education to humanities, business and science. Building on ecological understandings from Bateson (1974), Bookchin (2005), Capra (1997, 1996) and Hill *et al*. (2004), an ecological learning web describes the complex web of inter-relationships between students, teacher, content and processes. This web is mutually woven over the semester by me and the students, in such a way that it builds *and* sustains community, which in turn enables and facilitates deep learning.

Applied social ecology means that my theory is grounded in my practice – I walk my talk. My pedagogical practices in the unit demonstrate a central understanding of the unit - that creativity is based on the process of 'offer, accept, extend". In simple terms this means I offer content/ processes/ myself; students accept and extend on my offer, which comes back to me as a new offer - which I accept and extend and offer back to them and so it goes (Ellwood, 2008). Of course, students also make/ accept and extend offers among themselves. A crucial point here is that for an ecological learning web to be woven and for deep learning to take place students need to accept and extend on my/ their offers. So what are aspects of my praxis that motivate students to accept and extend on the 'offers' and so weave a web that facilitates and holds deep learning? Risk taking and vulnerability are implicit in making offers, accepting and extending on them just as they are in learning and in creativity. So how do we as educators/ teachers co-create learning contexts in which risk taking and vulnerability are possible for students *and* teachers? What is the praxis that builds an ecological web of relationships that allows, supports and sustains this?[4]

In placing the student at the centre of their learning the teacher as student is similarly placed. I am an active learner. I take my own learning risks alongside the students, sharing and celebrating my learning edges. My willingness to do this, and my ongoing congruence in working with the majority of unit activities at the same time as the students, develops student trust in the work we are doing. It also grounds Freire's notion that,

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[4]   Writing about my praxis means it reads as a linear experience – it is not. All my practices occur
     simultaneously in a deeply integrated way. This integrated approach is crucial for effective pedagogy.

> From the outset her (*the teacher's*) efforts must coincide with those of the student to engage in critical thinking and the mutual quest for humanisation. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust of people and their creative power. To achieve this they must be partners of students in their relations with them. (Freire, 1970/1996, p. 56)

While I find this challenging on days when I'd like to hide behind 'the teacher teaches and the students learn', my own willingness to make collage, finger paint and write my haiku, sharing my critical theorised reflections when there is time, demonstrates the worthiness of the process and lets the students know that I am an active risk taking learner along with them. My participation is crucial in building a mutually trustworthy ecological web and as this student acknowledges it also demonstrates that learning is life-long.

> She gets involved with all activities and doesn't just tell you what to do and stand back. Catherine leads by example. She doesn't ask you to do anything she's not willing to do herself. She never asks you to be more vulnerable than she's willing to be. If she wants you to share of yourself, she shares first. If she wants you to play a game where you might have to be silly, she'll be right there too, being just as silly. However, if you don't want to participate in any of the games, she completely respects your right to pass. She shows that learning is life-long. (Testimonial, 2007)

Through my participation I model vulnerability, which is also a crucial aspect of engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994). I articulate my pedagogical practices within engaged pedagogy, which means that that my ways of working are theoretically positioned *and* transparent for students, with hooks (1994) as one of the unit readings[5]. University teachers' willingness to *demonstrate* risk and vulnerability is particularly crucial for those engaged in teacher education in university education faculties where students are learning *how* to be teachers of future learners. As hooks suggests,

> When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share … Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. This empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. (1994, p. 21)

This is a challenging paradigm shift in a culture where traditionally, teachers know and students learn. It is a culture-shift that is crucial for engaged learning and also for engaged teaching. My own creative work with the students invariably provides me with shifts in consciousness and deeper understanding of the particular learning edge I am working with – for example I may use the collage activity to explore my current research challenges. This benefits my own development and feeds back into my teaching. The following student reflection shows how my demonstrating professional learning edges were crucial for her learning as a future teacher. It also shows how learning shifts appropriately shared by a teacher are powerfully educative and build mutual respect:

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[5] All unit readings are explicitly applied in unit tutorials and lectures. This means my ways of working are transparent as well as being grounded in experiential learning. Readers are updated regularly to reflect current theorists and practitioners.

> Educators need to know the value of being learners themselves and they need to value students learning – this class really showed that. Catherine taught us 'it's okay not to know' and showed us how to model 'learning our way towards knowing'. (Unit Feedback, 2006)

Developing and maintaining /sustaining trust is a multifaceted and ongoing process built in to all aspects of my pedagogy. It is underscored by sustained deep listening on my part, as a teacher. In modelling deep listening, alongside critical personal reflection, I facilitate student critical reflection about themselves and their learning / life journeys positioned within a politicised ecological whole:

> She really listens to students (and not just their words) and she is aware of how self / subjectivities can be critically reflected on to better understand others and have effective relationships. (Unit Feedback, 2005)

Pedagogical practices are constitutive. These practices both shape us and our learning and are in turn *themselves* shaped by how we teach-learn. Practising engaged pedagogy, practising vulnerability, trust and risk taking in turn shapes the pedagogical encounters and develops the learning-teaching subjects. The trust that is crucial in risk taking and which develops through the *consistent* application of my pedagogical practices allows safety in being vulnerable – they are not separate. Discursive practices become effective over time *and* with consistency. As one student reflected this consistency is crucial:

> It's about trust and safety. We try the water and if it's safe – and safe again and again and again – then we trust. Then we trust and shine our gifts and talents. Tell our stories. But only if it's safe to trust over time. We watch what happens. It's about the heart really. Intentions. (Unit Feedback, 2004)

It is evident from this reflection that risk taking itself in turn develops and strengthens trust, which in turn deepens student engagement and learning and how the student participates in the class. This trust helps build the web of relationships which are then able to safely hold the vulnerability involved in learning and creativity. Social ecology gives a theoretical framework for this ecological web - creative and critical thinking provide ways of entering and exploring the unit content.

Applied creative arts in agency and critical thinking: the right to pass, games and creative arts practices

Creative arts meet soul needs, shift consciousness and both facilitate and enhance learning. These approaches are usually not experienced in university settings outside specific discipline areas yet they are crucial in educating for sustainable living as individuals and global citizens (Heywood, 2005; Griggs, 2003; Neville, 2006; Tacey, 2005). Critical thinking and personal agency are also developed through the use of creative arts.

As a central learning principle and pedagogical practice, I use 'the right to pass' as an option for all students and myself in all unit activities with the exception of assessment tasks which come under the university rules. I do this knowing that learning needs to be owned in order to be meaningful, effective and sustained over time. It also allows students power over their vulnerability and risk taking. Having the right to pass is a way of activating student

awareness of their ownership of learning and all that it entails. This right and its responsibility is explained to students at the beginning of the unit and reinforced during the unit. The responsibility that comes with this right is that students are asked to use their time as an opportunity to critically reflect on how come they have chosen to pass in this activity at this time. There are always students in each cohort who exercise their right to pass. This proves to be crucial in some students' experiences of empowerment and agency in the unit and also develops trust, as I consistently maintain its application:

> Exercising my right to pass' was big for me because it made me make choices for myself instead of doing things because someone told me to. All of my education including uni has been about being told to do something and doing it whether I was motivated to or not so it was amazing for me to pass on an activity, I felt empowered then to say 'yes' because I'd been able to say 'no'. (Student Unit Feedback, 2005)

Each tutorial begins with a game and follow-up discussion which grounds the game in class relevant theory. My pedagogical intentions about using games are clear - have fun, reawaken our playfulness which is so crucial in creativity and in life, get to know each other, cut across power relations and break down 'othering', get our bodies moving to better enable learning, apply and ground specific content theory and build inclusivity. All the games are inclusive – without winners and losers – and succeed because of all the players. At the same time each of us can exercise our right to pass and not join in. Playing games means we get to have a laugh – often running about the room engaging our bodies, quite literally bumping up against and sitting next to students we mightn't normally choose to sit near, making fools of ourselves. Having fun re-fills often empty playful places of ourselves and helps sustains goodwill for subsequent challenging activities and conversations (Boal, 2002). Being safely vulnerable – even in a game – enables the soil of our-selves to soften so that learning can take place. All students comment on the fun aspect of the games however as this comment reflects, students go deeper and critically reflect on their placement in the unit:

> The games she uses, aside from providing the basis for theoretical learning in the context of the unit, also help to develop that sense of community. The community within Catherine's classroom is a safe place, a place where you feel supported and encouraged in your learning and where you feel like you can bring your whole self to the table, not just your academic mind, something which seems to be rare and undervalued in academic learning environments. (Testimonial, 2007)

We use a variety of creative arts approaches in the unit as a way to explore and apply unit theory. The experience of creative arts themselves in turn establishes and demonstrates the inter-relationship between learning and creativity. The creative arts we use over the 13 weeks of the unit are: collage; finger painting; writing 'first thoughts'; making word clusters; bringing life to writing through multi-sensory questions; writing in place; haiku; joint text construction; body meditation; place based mediation; drama games and theatre of the oppressed. In week 2 as a beginning place for each student's learning in the unit we use a structured collage process in which students focus on their individual learning-creative edges and goals for the unit (Camden Pratt, 2002, 2007). This becomes a resource for future tutorial activities and a document for Assessment 2 and their reflections on their learning in the unit.

As Freire (1996) suggests teachers do, I demonstrate a profound trust in students' creative power. Hands on activities are linked to a lecture and theoretical discussion so that theory

emerges from and is grounded in the experience. Each workshop activity scaffolds the next. We use the same approaches a number of times throughout the unit building student confidence in applying these approaches. Some examples - in Week 4 we use the collage from Week 2 with first thoughts, word clusters and haikus - moving from visual texts into written texts, experiencing the opportunities and permissions of different creative arts and their ways of deepening learning, which has been the focus of the accompanying lecture. In Week 5 we use writing first thoughts, word clusters, finger painting and haiku in the tutorial, as ways of grounding the lecture on emotion in learning and creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006; Goleman, 1996, 1999; Gardner, 2006; Heywood, 2005; Nachmanovitch, 1990; Neville, 2005). The following week we use a body-mind meditation, as a way into grounding lecture material on embodied knowing and the place of the body in learning (Balenky *et al*., 1997; Gardner, 2006; Hocking *et al*., 2001), with students using finger painting, word clusters and haiku to express their learning as it emerges from the body-mind meditation.

Boal's (2000) Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) develops critical thinking in a drama context. TO is based on Boal's notion of there being no such thing as spectators or innocent bystanders, that we are each of us spect-*actors* and in this have a role to play in oppression and its interruption (ibid). In TO the 'audience' become actors in the 'play' of the oppression, taking turns to step into the various roles and try out different approaches, thereby experiencing located positions in the oppression and through this developing understanding of the various roles played out in oppression and possible ways of interrupting it. This process allows often-marginalised voices of oppression to be heard and responded to and for learning to take place about these locations. Learning is facilitated by the creative process and so demonstrates the inter-relationship between learning and creativity as well as developing critical thinking and demonstrating ways of bringing about personal, systemic and cultural change.

We experience TO toward the end of the unit scaffolded by drama games and activities in previous weeks. The trust developed over the semester is necessary for the stories of oppression to emerge from and then be enacted by the group. The strong ecological learning web that has developed supports this process. In 2004 a small group of indigenous students acted out aspects of their oppression as learners in school. As one non-indigenous student moved from the 'audience' and became an actor in the 'play' she tried to get those who were oppressed to act in ways she felt would shift their oppression, her comments below reflect the reflexive and empathic power of TO:

> I found the Theatre of the Oppressed exercises unsettling (part of their intention, no doubt) … The scene in which some of the Indigenous students expressed their sense of historical marginalisation in Eurocentric learning spaces was particularly confronting. On the one hand I wanted them to demand justice, but at the same time I recognised that this was more of the same patronising approach they were protesting about. (Student Reflection Document, 2004)

Theory can develop agency and liberate when it based on experience which the students can see/identify. Using creative arts allows experiences to be enacted and expressed in a classroom setting. These can then be safely reflected upon using theory which places the individual experience inside a political theorised whole. During an intense class discussion on discourse and agency following the tutorials using TO, a young veiled Muslim woman and an older Anglo student told the group that they had sat in classes together in the same education subjects over a four year period but both of them had never spoken to each other prior to this

unit. As the conversation progressed and they shared their perceptions of this lack of engagement the young Muslim woman said, "So I guess we have both being 'othering' each other" (In-class conversation, 2004). This was a powerful moment for the Muslim woman, the Anglo student *and* the class; her personal knowing and learning became a community learning. It also grounded critical theory. This same student went on to comment in her reflection document about her personal learning through the unit:

> For most of my life I have been made to feel different … I have come to the realisation that being different is not a bad thing in fact it's what makes me special …I think having had this experience has made me realise that people think much more of me than I give them credit for … I have rarely felt included and understood, but rather excluded because of my appearance so I have learnt to live with it. I believe making people realise their negative judgements toward me is [sic] not at all what they thought makes me feel positive about myself. People have so many misconceptions on how Muslim women are. They are surprised by what I know and who I am … People are interested in learning about my culture and by speaking with them about who I am; I am opening doors for people they didn't know existed. For the first time in my university life, I walked into a class and could say hello to everyone. I was surprised that so many people could relate to me. (Reflection Document, 2004)

For teacher education students, my grounding in Freire (1996, 2005), Gardner (2006), Giroux (1994), Gore (1993) and hooks (1994), amongst others, through these pedagogical practices, motivates and models an ecological way to teach.

> Seeing her model a teaching approach that is very reflective of the theory of best practice – questioning, promoting critical thinking, drawing on various learning styles and cultural knowledge (valuing these) - has been extremely motivating . . . She 'walked her talk' and completed my up to then theoretical understanding of diversity and how to promote an inclusive classroom / individualising and actively searching/ encouraging / supporting individuals' learning processes and their creativity with respect, compassion and sensitivity. (Unit Feedback SFU, 2005)

Critical autobiography and transformation: centring the personal using creative arts

Drawing on critical autobiography (Church, 1995; Camden Pratt 2002, 2006, 2007) and social ecology I begin the first lecture with photographs of myself as a young child in two quite different life contexts and sites of learning - school and non school - and invite students to discuss what they see in these visual discourses. In doing so I immediately position my self and my life as worthy of rigorous academic inquiry and I make myself vulnerable to student observations about aspects of my early life. By association, their own lives are similarly worthy. I ground this by having them reflect on their early life memories in various sites of learning and the impacts on who they are today. Through this, the notion that we are each central in our ongoing learning, is grounded as a unit priority and of academic value. It also allows me to be present as a whole person and in doing so, model this for students:

> The lecturer accepted every individual and our different journeys. She shared her own journey and that allowed us to feel more comfortable in the space and willing to share our

own. I have been able to bring myself and my life into my university studies. (Unit Feedback, 2006)

Next, I foreground ideas of agency and transformation within a social ecology map as described in the opening paragraph of this paper and highlight how social ecology places 'you' at the centre of 'y/our' own learning. I use a popular song 'Unwritten' (Bedingfield, 2005), as a way into discussing unit opportunities and the social ecology map. In the following lecture I introduce critical theory and problematise notions of agency within a critical discussion of the intersections of personal, social, political and cultural discourses and education (Boal, 2002, 2000; Freire, 1970, 2005; Gore, 1993; hooks, 1994; Whang & Waters, 2001).

In a later lecture and related tutorials I draw on critical autobiography, creative arts and strategic questioning, in discussing power in and from the margins (Armstrong *et al.*, 2001; Higgs *et al.*, 2007; Camden Pratt 2002, 2007; Church, 1995; Peavey, 2000). I show and discuss a painting from my 2002 PhD *Daughters of Persephone: legacies of maternal madness.* My private story and those of the women with whom I researched is in the public domain through this PhD and its subsequent popular press publication *Out of the Shadows: daughters growing up with 'mad' mother (2006);* exhibitions (2003) and public talks (2003, 2006, 2007). My movement from the private personal into the public social, through my academic work, gives students an example of how to do this using rigorous academic theorising and also says that even the messy marginalised stories of our lives are valued. I draw on Giroux's (1994, p. x) positioning of pedagogy as "the creation of a public sphere, one that brings people together in a variety of sites to talk, exchange information, listen, feel their desires, and expand their capacities for joy, love, solidarity, and struggle" and the feminist understanding of the personal as political**.** When the self is firmly centred and understood in social and political terms using critical theory, education can become a practice of freedom – until then, there is no agency.

My demonstrating how to theorise about the personal allows and teaches students to theorise from their own lives. Working this way seems to be particularly transformative for those students whose lived experiences have been in the marginal silenced places –mental illness, suicide of loved one, parental substance addictions, sexual abuse, cultural marginalisation, sexuality marginalisation etc. Providing students with theoretical grounding for discussing and unpacking these messy areas using theory enables a personal transformative shift. As one student (2005) articulated it in her final reflection document:

Just as Camden-Pratt (2003[6] and Lecture 4) brought the asylum into the academy, I have been able to bring my depression into the academy. This has allowed me to voice a silenced part of myself. In the marketplace I had the opportunity to show fellow students what Depression is like and how it affects my learning, especially in academic settings, while also showing how it can simultaneously enhance my creativity … Working creatively helped me to place the depression outside myself so that I could better understand it to communicate it to others, and objectively increase my own understanding (Camden-Pratt, Lecture 4). I recognised that the social silencing of Depression profoundly influenced feelings of disengagement from myself, and from the wider community which inevitably caused the silencing of the self. My knowledge has shifted as I was able to move myself from the margin into the centre and by doing this I made the social body

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[6]   Now published in Higgs *et al.*, 2007

bigger (bell hooks, 1984). My personal story became a social story. (Reflection Document, 2005)

The student is referring to the second assessment task in the unit - *Marketplace of Learning and Creativity*– in which the room is transformed into a marketplace with each student bringing a creative depiction that tells a story about her/his learning journey and understanding of learning. The assessment is a celebration of our learning and the learning risks we have taken. This student created a simple and powerful depiction of how Depression affected her learning. Three canvas were placed alongside one another: one a puzzle-piece face showing the segmented self, the second a butterfly surrounded by silver foil which conveyed hope and light, and the third a candle melted on a canvas which had a background of old no longer prescribed medication scripts thereby demonstrating the changing nature of Depression. She lit the candle at the beginning of marketplace and by its end two hours later, the candle had burned down and destroyed most of her canvas; much like Depression eats away at life. The student had a few lines of text which helped students understand that the candle represented her life source and how Depression made it burn down slowly destroying her ability to learn and engage with life.

In the same reflection document quoted above, the student demonstrates the kinds of empowerment and insights that can come with working creatively with autobiographical material, as well as the place of peer feedback in this:

> Using the candle as a symbol was very powerful as it contrasted feelings of darkness towards the medical model against feelings of hope and determination. I felt empowered that the candle could only be lit once; therefore the canvas was 'alive' only for the duration of the Marketplace. Peer feedback from the marketplace conveyed the beginnings of new knowledge for those who had not experienced mental illness and empathy and healing from those who had. (Reflection Document, 2005)

Students are encouraged to use "I" in their essays and documents; this grounds critical autobiography and applied social ecology, which places the student at the centre of their learning. It is also reflective of my research practices (Camden Pratt, 2002, 2006, 2007). In each assessment students are encouraged to submit written work in non-traditional academic forms including narrative and poetry, with well integrated academic referencing and critical rigour. This combination of practices was particularly meaningful for one student who wrote in her final document:

> In my first assessment I put in a story I wrote about Stranger Danger using my Aboriginal storytelling style. I realise now at the end of this semester that in the beginning I saw all of you as strangers and I felt in danger. I don't now. I think that's because it's been okay to be me and how I am. I guess we've done so much yarning together we're like a family – a new mob. (Student Reflection document, 2004)

Feedback on student assessment and ongoing learning is a crucial part of the learning cycle and contributes to the co-creation and maintenance of ecological learning webs. It provides an educative function as well as demonstrating how I and other students value each student's work. When critical autobiography is part of the unit and aspects of student lives are part of the content then feedback is even more crucial. Each student receives positive feedback from their peers in the marketplace using a provided feedback sheet which asks students to

comment on favourite aspects of each presentation as well as what they have learned from the presentation and how they connected with it. My own written feedback is grounded in examples from the student's work and provides positive recognition of their learning edges and the learning risks they have taken. I provide detailed constructive feedback on areas of strength and suggestions of how to deepen their engagement with the content including highlighting specific theory they need to develop. The challenges and opportunities of non-traditional forms of assessment, the need for scaffolding in this and the importance of feedback are highlighted in this student comment:

> Assessment tasks were somewhat open ended as they allowed students to express themselves within university-academic guidelines. Taking this unit was a challenge for me as I had previously questioned my own creativity. However, the way the unit was delivered allowed me, as well as many other students, to successfully show creativity, because there were no restrictions to what we could do, or on how we should express personal theories of learning and creativity. Assessment feedback was worthwhile, as it was positive and constructive, which was encouraging; it engaged students in learning and allowed them to take further risks. (Testimonial, 2007)

Concluding reflections: tying threads together

Social ecology maps the inter-relationship between the personal, the social/ political/ cultural, the environment and the spiritual. It facilitates students' learning by placing them at the centre of their learning in holistic and response-able learning contexts. It likewise places the teacher in the centre of her learning. Pedagogical practices using creative arts and critical thinking – including critical autobiography – provide students and teachers with the tools and skills to become creative and critically reflective agents of personal and social change. These pedagogies provide space and ongoing application of Freire's quest for humanisation in their combination of academic and personal rigour. This combination is crucial if as Giroux suggests:

> Teachers should become transformative intellectuals if they are to educate students to be active, critical citizens … This means providing students with the critical tools they will need to both understand and dismantle the chronic rationalisation of harmful social practices, while simultaneously appropriating the knowledge and skills they need to rethink the project of human emancipation. (Giroux, 1998, p. 127, p. 152)

In their words, student feedback suggests that unit pedagogies enable this:

> Having studied units in relation to discourse and power relations in society, this unit challenged me further, to really deconstruct my life's experiences and learning and practise 'reflexivity' using the theories which has really empowered me. I know myself better and can move forward with confidence to be open to other people's personalties and journeys and to what each new day brings. I am taking a more active role in my life, more perceptive about life and am more appreciative of events. (Student Unit Feedback, 2006)

Social ecology using creative arts and critical thinking provides an example of sustainable, critical and creative engaged university pedagogies. Writing to know in this paper, demonstrates how working holistically enables deep learning for students. It illuminated for

me how my participation as an engaged creative learner sustains my teaching. Be-ing teacher/learner inside do-ing teaching/learning is a way of approaching the university pedagogical site that facilitates and models sustainability through building an ecological web of relationships. It also opens opportunities for student and teacher transformation – so that even bare walls sing.

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