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PEARSON *and* PEDAGOGY: COUNTERING CO-DEPENDENCY

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■ Abstract

Noel Pearson and Marcia Langton have both used the terms “co-dependency” and “rescuing” as part of their challenge to the rights-based focus informing Indigenous policies in Australia since the 1960s. Their premise is that the liberal/Left welfare-based agenda, for decades, has largely overlooked Indigenous responsibility. At the same time, they recognise that policy frameworks strongly influence agency and individual responsibility. I examine the implications of this argument within the tertiary education environment, using systems theory to foreground the complexity of individual change within well-established social patterns. This paper reflects on how my thinking and pedagogy have generally been based on a “moral vanity” that, at times, has sanctioned shallow and passive learning experiences that have failed to challenge student achievement.

■ Introduction

Indigenous intellectuals Noel Pearson (2007a), Marcia Langton (2008) and Warren Mundine (see Robinson & Kearney, 2008) have challenged the rights-based Indigenous policy agenda that has prevailed in Australia for decades. Their critique of this focus by the liberal/Left cannot be simply dismissed as neo-conservative. By challenging Indigenous Australians to take responsibility for their social and economic well-being, there is an implicit challenge for non-Indigenous Australians, right across the political spectrum, to recognise an historical pattern of “co-dependency” (Langton, 2008, p. 162). Pearson (2001a, p. 16) argues the state plays a perennial rescuing role that maintains welfare dependency, and that “we must ... face passive welfare and substance abuse epidemics as the critical issues”. Pearson’s argument, in particular, has forced me, as a liberal/Left academic, to reflect on my own positioning. How has rights-focused thinking impacted on what I do as an educator? To what extent has my approach to teaching and learning support for tertiary students been prone to rescuing and co-dependency? In this paper, I explore these issues in three parts: first, an overview of the persuasive arguments developed by Pearson and, more recently, Langton; second, a reflection on the way my thinking has been informed by a rights-focused approach; and third, based on the challenge to build what Pearson calls “a radical centre”, a consideration of some of the pedagogical implications.

■ Pearson’s position

Pearson, for the last eight years or so, has attempted to challenge the progressive rights-based, liberal thinking on welfare and drugs in Australia. His position on the responsibilities of individual Indigenous people appears to be quite conservative, but his argument very clearly includes the importance of Native Title and increased government funding – as long as it is not “squandered if we have no understanding of the problems” (2001a, p. 17). The problems, as Pearson and Langton portray them, are not primarily rights based or symptomatic of colonisation. Accordingly, they call for a significant change of thinking, analysis and policy direction to occur.

To fully understand Pearson’s decision to “champion the Indigenous responsibility agenda” (2007a, p. 57), it is important to provide an adequate account of his, and Langton’s (2008), line of thought. Pearson’s (2001b)

account of the history of the Australian welfare state emphasises the way it actively assisted poor whites in the twentieth century, but has resulted in a form of passive dependency for many Aboriginal people because it failed to facilitate social and economic development. While the Left's focus on rights has been well-intentioned, the specific forms of welfare have not been based on an active process of engagement with the real economy. Pearson (2001b) asserts that "... dependency and passivity kills people and is the surest road to social decline" (p. 11). The idea of welfare is, clearly, not to structure in dependency, but rather to enable a springboard into active participation "in the real economy" (Pearson, 2001b, p. 11).

To demonstrate the way the transition from poverty to productive economic engagement has been achieved, Pearson (2001b) carefully tracks the historical reciprocity between the working class in Australia and industrial capital, a relationship enabling the poor to mobilise collectively and benefit from the process. This was a constructive relationship that ensured welfare safeguards bolstered active integration into productive economic activity. Pearson (2001b, p. 7) points out that public health, education and infrastructure are fundamental to this process of economic development. Welfare has been enabling for white Australians because the elements above have worked together as linkages to the real economy. In contradistinction, for most Aboriginal people (especially over the last 40 years, and especially for rural and remote people), welfare has been disabling: they "have only experienced the income support that is payable to the permanently unemployed and marginalised ... passive welfare ..." (Pearson, 2001b, p. 6). The outcome of "life in the safety net for three decades and two generations has produced a social disaster" (Pearson, 2001b, p. 7).

This is an economic-based and policy-based understanding of dependence and demise made by Pearson, not one based on inherent racial traits. To break the cycle of dysfunction and disorder in many communities, he calls for a drastic intervention to restore order in these mainly regional and remote situations. Indigenous values and relationships have been eroded primarily by dependency on "sit down money" and forms of support that do not involve people in their own self-development. But Pearson's no-tolerance approach to abuse and addiction and his demand for individual responsibility does not presume that social and cultural development is not part of the whole process required for transformation.

Social change is inevitably complex and difficult, and Pearson's (2007a) argument represents a bold and distinctive vision for radical change, identifying the political ingredients for taking "an historical leap forward" (p. 56) and "finding the radical centre – where rights and responsibilities are synthesised" (p. 58). The challenge, as Pearson (2007a) sees it, is to find "a way to move beyond the paternalism of the past

without destroying the moral and cultural order which had been such a strong quality of our community" (p. 28). What he describes as the Left's "moral vanity" has tended to translate into a process where

... at some point empathy and acknowledgement turn into moral superiority, and the relative failures of one's cultural and political opponents become the basis of accusations and insensitivity or racism. At this point, race becomes a useful club to beat the Neanderthals from the right, and the racism serves the cultural and political purposes of the progressive accuser rather than the humanity of those subjected to it (Pearson, 2007a, pp. 30-31).

Pearson's call is for the Right to deal with its denial, and for the Left to recognise its libertarian moral vanity.

Pearson's earlier work has been powerfully developed in "White Guilt, Victimhood and the Quest for a Radical Centre" (2007a). Making comparisons with the way rights and responsibilities have been negotiated by African Americans in their struggle against racism and discrimination with the Australian context, Pearson closely examines the historical and social tensions in achieving an effective balance, something he describes as "the radical centre". He draws on African American academic Shelby Steele (2006), who uses the term "white guilt" to explain the way the loss of moral authority in the United States in the Civil Rights era has resulted in white attempts to restore legitimacy at an individual and institutional level in a way that is much more about salvaging their own loss of righteousness and legitimacy than about the genuine development of blacks. Steele points out that the dominant paradigm of black militancy in the post Civil Rights movement has traded on this white guilt by using it as leverage for a rights based and resistant black identity. Based on Steele's argument, Pearson (2007a) asserts that "black rights [have] become white responsibilities" (p. 25), resulting in the "politics of victimhood" (p. 26).

Using very broad brushstrokes, Steele identifies the way conservative American values were seen as rotten to the core – founded on racism, imperialism, and sexism – by the baby boom Civil Rights generation. What Steele (2006) describes as "difficult character principles ... personal responsibility, hard work, individual initiative, delayed gratification, commitment to excellence, competition by merit, [and] honour in achievement ..." (p. 109) were largely rejected by a generation that used this loss of moral authority to develop an oppositional ethics based on social morality and rights-based freedoms. Pearson sees the loss of "traditional" virtues (respect, skill development, responsibility, discipline, highly codified conduct), whether these traits are defined as Western or Indigenous, as debilitating for Aboriginal Australians:

Like Steele, I firmly believe that “black responsibility is the greatest – if not the only – transformative power available to blacks”. And the same goes for the white underclass. The conservative emphasis on personal responsibility and the liberal emphasis on individual choice and self-interest are as important as – nay, more important than – opening up opportunities for social progress. Access and opportunity are necessary but not sufficient for uplift, while personal responsibility and self-interest are indispensable (Pearson, 2008, p. 7).

This philosophical position demonstrates that Pearson’s position embraces much more than welfare reform, and counters structuralist-based assumptions undergirding Left/liberal theory.

There is widespread disagreement with Pearson’s prescription on social progress for Indigenous Australians and, although much of this is not published critique, some have described his position as assimilationist and conservative. This criticism appears in such Left-oriented web forums as “Crikey” (“Time for Pearson to Tone Down the Rhetoric”, 2007). Northern Territory Labor MP, Warren Snowden (2000), speaking on Radio National’s “Background Briefing”, exemplified the Left’s concerns arguing that “... a more sophisticated approach for the analysis of drinking behaviour and substance abuse ...” is needed:

You can’t expect Indigenous Australians to be in a position where they can assert confidently their own cultural imperatives in an economic and social milieu where they don’t have the sorts of services which other Australians have, where there are few in most cases, no employment opportunities, where their ability to be able to compete in the wider labour market for example, on the same basis as other Australians, is dramatically impacted on by their lack of skills development.

In one of the most systematic critiques of Pearson’s ideas, David Martin (2001) responds favourably to Pearson’s “call for a radical rethinking of the current policy climate” (p. 19), but he questions “an essentially mono-causal connection between the introduction of the welfare system and increasing social dysfunction” (p. 20). Martin’s concerns are based on ethnographic research in and around the Cape York area of Queensland, about the complexity of reciprocity (p. 9), the erosion of “Indigenous authority structures and conflict resolution mechanisms” (p. 10), and the complex mixture of “social, political, and economic forces of quite profound significance” (p. 11) (as well as welfare dependency). Martin (2001) also has a problem with Pearson’s lack of clarity on “what constitutes the ‘community’ or for that matter the ‘family’ in the Aboriginal context” (p. 14), the danger

of “blaming the victim” (p. 17), and the long pattern of problems from external interventions (p. 18).

While the concerns raised by Martin and others confirm there is a high level of complexity to the issues Pearson has identified, they do not diminish the significance of Pearson’s focus on an over-emphasis on rights and the need to break destructive social patterns. The fact that Pearson, Langton (2008), Mundine (see Robinson & Kearney, 2008) and Aird (2008) have all challenged the rights-based paradigm is something that cannot be written off as a reactionary intervention into social and political debate on what are indeed very complex matters. None of these people denies the importance of culture, land, identity and basic human rights, but they make thought-provoking and engaged contributions that add a level of depth and diversity to policy debates and social issues. There is little doubt that there is no “quick fix” to deeply entrenched problems, and that new policies and initiatives need to be sensitively and carefully implemented, in ways where the people affected can see the value of changing well-established patterns within communities.

As part of this change to prevailing patterns, Pearson (2001a, p. 10) argues support must be delivered in such a way that requires an active response from the recipients: “Money acquired without principle is expended without principle”. The principle of reciprocity was there in the development of the white working poor through the twentieth century, so Pearson is calling for radical welfare reform to set up the same kind of engagement with the real economy for Indigenous Australians. This is a significant challenge and will require the government to invest carefully-targeted funding. In this sense, Pearson does not disagree with other Indigenous leaders that, throughout history, government commitment to resourcing Indigenous people has been well below what is required, and that policies have failed to redress social and cultural problems. Behrendt (2007, p. 9) cites an Access Economics estimation of under-funding in the health area alone for Indigenous Australians at \$450 million in 2005. But while there is agreement that, along with increased funding, policy reform is needed, ideas about policy focus and analyses of the issues differ considerably.

Marcia Langton (2008) clearly supports Pearson’s line of argument, and especially challenges what she also identifies as a persisting liberal/Left rights-focused discourse. No matter how well-intentioned it may be, she asserts this discourse has privileged an ideological argument over the protection of women and children whose abuse has been well-known for decades. In other words, when rights are asserted, much clearer articulation is needed about the precise nature of the rights (Rowse 2002). Langton (2008, p. 13) identifies:

... two camps ... divided by historical issues: those who have lived through the many tragedies and

their aftermath in remote Australia committed to preventing the destruction of their societies in a haze of alcohol and drug abuse; and those with cosmopolitan urban experience who have allowed libertarian leanings, and deep political disappointment, to confuse their logic.

The way political struggles tend to lock people into entrenched ideological positions is powerfully identified here – to the point that holding on to an argument can sometimes take precedence over the people we purport to represent.

The Federal Government's intervention into remote communities in the Northern Territory in 2007 was seen as an extreme initiative by many leaders and commentators, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Langton (2008, p. 2), however, points out that the intervention was an inevitable political response to years of policy failures:

The combined effect of the righteous media campaign for action and the Emergency Intervention has been a metaphorical dagger, sunk deep into the heart of the powerful, wrong-headed Aboriginal male ideology that has prevailed in Indigenous affairs policies and practices for decades. My hope is that, as the new evidence mounts of the need for a radical new approach, the shibboleths of the old Left – who need perpetual victims for their analysis to work – will also be dismantled.

In the shift towards Pearson's line for a radical centre between the practical and symbolic, and the Right and the Left, Langton (2008) acknowledges that the Right's victim blamers represent "uncivil deniers of the right of Aboriginal people to coexist with settler society" (p. 148); however, she also sees a pattern whereby "romantic defenders of Aboriginal self-determination" (p. 148) have a co-dependent (p. 162) relationship with victims. She asserts that the "economically empowered, free-thinking, free-speaking Aborigine has been set to one side because it is more interesting to play with the warm, cuddly cultural Aborigine – the one who is so demoralised that the only available role is as a passive player" (2008, p. 161). The ideological battles known as the "culture wars", and the focus on reconciliation and justice, Langton (2008, p. 161) suggests, have little to do with actually addressing the social and economic conditions Aboriginal people deal with, "but everything to do with white settlers positioning themselves around the central problem of their country: can a settler nation be honourable?"

Langton (2008) perceptively identifies national honour and the rhetoric of reconciliation as a magnet that has pulled people in: "political characters played by 'Aboriginal leaders' pull the levers that draw settler Australians to them in a co-dependent relationship" (p.

161). It is true that we white settlers do tend to want to defend our honour on all kinds of moral issues and social problems; however, the energy often goes into jostling for the moral high ground, while little actually changes. As a cultural studies academic, and having worked in Indigenous education for 11 years, I have been a participant in the liberal/Left's rights-oriented focus, and it is to examining my own quest for honour I now turn.

■ My "moral vanity"

Langton's point about honour links with Pearson's comments on "moral vanity", and this has caused me to reflect on some basic assumptions underpinning positions I have held for many years. This article is very much about my taking responsibility for a form of moral vanity that has involved rejecting most elements of conservative, individual morality in a process of proving the virtue, indeed priority, of social morality. But my rights-based, social constructionist logic underestimated the capacity for individual agency to respond to social forces in which all human beings are embedded. Steele (2006) and Pearson (2008) suggest the challenge for minority groups, in an environment where there is now less outright exclusion, is to take what opportunities are available for self-development and economic independence rather than eliciting soft admissions of "white guilt".

Pearson's (2007a) assertion is that change starts with one's self: "It is one thing to have structural analysis, but at the end of the day it is through individual agency that structures can be challenged and reformed. Behaviour is ultimately about agency – first personal and then social" (p. 53). He then recounts walking home one day as a private school student and being verbally abused by working class whites. Referring to this atypical incident based on race and class, he asserts that race and class do matter, but that they need not be destiny. Steele (2008) bemoans the fact that "the essence of blackness is grounded in grievance" and that blacks are expected to have "... a chip on ... [their] shoulder" (pp. 7 & 8).

Reflecting on agency and how we make certain critical decisions in life – whether consciously or nonconsciously – I recognise how I have struggled with the working class chip on my shoulder, all too often using it as an excuse, but slowly (this took me a long time) taking responsibility for my behaviour and working at changing the "narrative", changing the story I told about myself, and changing my thinking. Born in 1961 to working class parents who had grown up in country towns, I am in fact a white beneficiary of the sound economic development policies that Pearson (2001b) outlined. I received a good education at public schools from committed and progressive teachers, with free milk before morning recess. I resided in a place that allowed relatively safe exploration and adventure.

Local junior sport and a community-oriented neighbourhood and church environment provided me further opportunities to develop as a young person, as did my parent's close connections with grandparents, uncles, aunties, and cousins, both in Perth and in the rural south-west. All this I did not create for myself. There was a network of support around me that scaffolded my learning, and challenged me to grow. Any resistance or rebellion on my part occurred in a relatively safe and supportive family and social context. Similarly, policy frameworks had been set in place – of the kind that Pearson outlines in "Light on the Hill" (2001b) – establishing the economic, social and cultural context that enabled my siblings and I to gain tertiary qualifications (educational levels well beyond the Year 9 levels achieved by my father and mother). So "white privilege" was a factor, but coming from a working class background, we did need to be responsible to take the opportunities available.

Reading the Book of James as part of my Baptist upbringing firmly implanted in my mind the notion that honour comes much more from what you do than what you say or believe (faith is dead if it is separated from good deeds). Ironically, I can now see that, for most of my life, I have been much better at polemics than practice. The primary model of Christianity I saw around me when younger was that the focus seemed very much with individual self-righteousness and self-justification. When I entered university at 23 years of age I was ready for the critical and contentious ideas I encountered. I was swapping a pulpit for a lectern, prophetic voices for resistant readings, and Calvinist introspection for communist collectivism. In other words, even though I left the Baptist Church behind, and after six years working in a bank, struggling with some kind of honourable conduct and political engagement was always going to be part of my journey.

In 1978, at 17 years of age, I read Kevin Gilbert's *Living Black*. I knew that most people I encountered found such reading and ideas to be highly questionable, so this just intensified the experience. Once again, the key issue here was about my personal honour and winning arguments rather than a deep engagement with Aboriginal people. Often I was involved in idealising and romanticising Aboriginal culture to counter the prevailing racist discourse of disparagement and denial. Nevertheless, reading Aboriginal people's own accounts of living as Indigenous Australians did have a significant impact on me. I had Aboriginal friends at school and at the football club, but my contact and knowledge was limited and, as Langton suggests (1993), mainly via the media.

My knowledge gradually developed, primarily through my reading. Taking opportunities to counter negative stereotypes, I did not realise that, at the same time, I was also perpetuating the very myths that Gilbert identifies at the outset of *Living Black* (1978, p. 1):

... the majority of Aboriginals are deeply ashamed of what they know is the truth about their people today. So, together with many sympathetic whites, they embrace and propagate a number of myths about themselves: that Aboriginals share freely; that they have a strong feeling of community; that they don't care about money and lack the materialism of white society; that they care more deeply about their children than do white parents.

So why did I believe these myths? In the late 1970s, Gilbert (1978, p. 1) suggested that "Unbigoted whites believe them because the human desolation that is Aboriginal Australia is not yet understood in this country". Almost 30 years earlier, Gilbert's point aligns closely with Steele's "white guilt" thesis. Thinking about this anxiousness to prove myself as an anti-racist white, about whom I was then, and what I was looking for, it is clear that all reading is to some extent selective reading informed by one's position and context. I took what I needed at the time.

I also overlooked what "Grandfather Koori" proclaims right at the end of *Living Black* to Kevin Gilbert. This comment is very close to what Pearson and Langton are saying today: "You want rights but you ain't got the discipline or guts to deserve them. You're not grown up enough in yourselves to even teach your kids what's right. But you can't have rights without responsibility ... Kids can't grow up without rules" (Gilbert, 1978, p. 303). His comments seem harsh, but he is very clear about the need for people to make changes in their own behaviours:

You can't find happiness without first making rules to stamp out the things that make unhappiness. You can't get dignity unless you follow the rules that help you to be dignified. You can't find value in yourself until you build it by respecting yourself through living right. If you tolerate crumminess, gutlessness, meanness, wife bashing, kid bashing and neglect then you'll never get the strength to climb out of hell ... If our people cannot change how it is amongst themselves, then the Aboriginal people will never climb back out of hell (Gilbert, 1978, p. 305).

Grandfather Koori's comments, then, encompass both individual change and community change, both personal agency and collective responsibility. The key is to break destructive patterns – as individuals and as a community/nation; this is Pearson, Langton and Mundine's challenge.

In considering how I have positioned myself in this discourse on rights and culture, it is clear that key people have influenced my thinking. It is also clear that I was part of a whole generation where such political and discursive possibilities opened up. Like

may others, I was looking for causes, wore many of the badges, and did many of the anti-racism marches in the 1980s. I had one foot planted in the local community church of my youth, and one foot stepping out into the very liberal academic domain of scholarly thought. This was before the cracks appeared in pan-Aboriginal solidarity post-1988 (Sutton, 2008), and once again my desire for an Aboriginal hero or cause to champion was more about my need for a messiah and moral/ideological legitimation than about dealing with what Gilbert describes above as “the truth about their people today”. My truth, my moral vanity, counted more.

Muecke (1992, p. 17) challenges liberal/Left desire when he provocatively declares, “They like their natives pure”. This says much about the Left’s desire – my desire. I slowly realised this desire was about my own struggle with purity and honour, something all humans struggle with in one way or another, but something very unfair to expect Aboriginal people to deliver up for me. Bhabha (1993, p. 19) points out that all too often we “polarise in order to polemicise” as we battle for the moral high ground. A great deal is invested in the positions we take, the arguments we engage in. Bhabha (1993) and Spivak (1990), key postcolonial theorists, take pains to problematise simplistic binary oppositions and myths of purity, but the propensity to polarise remains strong.

Pearson’s (2007d) “hunt for the radical centre” (p. 30) is a quest to open up a pathway between a locked-in binary he describes as two tribes: one with “the view that the absence or insufficient realisation of rights is the core of the indigenous predicament in our country” and the other with “the view that it is the absence of responsibilities that lies at the core of the people’s malaise”. Tensions and contradictions are inevitable in any attempts to chart a pathway through highly-charged polarities, and many Aboriginal people have major reservations with the Pearson/Langton/Mundine line of thought. Such thinking, such positions unsettle the existing ideological and political patterns. But if this causes us to reconsider the mix of rights and responsibilities in the quest for positive policy changes, this is an important process.

■ Countering co-dependency

The sustained argument of Pearson and Langton has made me reconsider my assumptions, beliefs and actions. In this sense, my struggle with rescuing and moral vanity is linked to their concern about passive welfare and co-dependency. This connection between pedagogy and politics demonstrates that, at all levels, there are deeply enmeshed and entangled social and cultural relationships in which we all play roles. Having outlined how I have gradually changed my thinking, I now consider the implications for the provision of learning support at a tertiary level. Once again, I do so primarily by identifying some of my rescuing prone

tendencies, but also some steps taken to change the co-dependent patterns through a scaffolded support process that facilitates independence.

For most Indigenous students entering tertiary studies the challenge is undeniably a considerable one, especially if the pathway is through an Indigenous tertiary access program. “Bridging” or “enabling” students often need to build skills that were not developed during their primary or secondary years. And, because these students frequently have dependants and/or health issues, and/or a negligible financial base, this means that there are many extracurricular factors that can make the learning process much more challenging than for young, middle-class, non-Indigenous university students. Disadvantage for Indigenous students is compounded by the fact that “other categories of disadvantage, such as rurality, isolation and low SES, are among the factors also impacting on them and their communities” (Walker, 2000, conclusion 14.1). It is precisely these three equity areas (Indigeneity, Low SES [socio economic standing], and Rural & Remote) that have been “resistant to equity policies and initiatives” (James & Devlin, 2005, p. 2).

The way such inequitable patterns are reproduced is made very clear in *Rites of Passage*. The school experience of Indigenous children is identified as a core factor in truancy and criminality, risk-taking activities by which Indigenous youths prove themselves (Beresford & Omaji, 1996). Given such deeply embedded patterns, special, strategic support is required for Indigenous students with this rural and remote/low SES profile (remembering that the majority of urban Indigenous youth are low SES students). Even at a tertiary level, Foley (1996, p. 54) points out that assistance involves more than narrow “academic support”. Incorporating foundational life skills, such as time management and financial planning, is crucial as well as critical reflection on social and cultural values. Enrolling in a course is not enough; if students are not present and engaged, there is no opportunity for an active learning process. If poor participation/retention/completion rates are to be redressed then carefully targeted support is crucial, for Foley (1996, p. 54) suggests “the real retention figures are much lower than anyone is prepared to accept”.

The challenge for universities, as expressed by James and Devlin (2005, p. 8), is “... to embrace and support Indigenous students within systems that have not been designed for the needs of Indigenous people without compromising the academic standards that Indigenous people have the right to expect and aspire to”. This is a challenge that “cuts both ways”, for Indigenous students also need to make a considerable effort to work at their studies to achieve success at this level. Rather than using disadvantage as an excuse, the challenge that Pearson identifies is to use this as motivation for achievement.

Considering the issues Indigenous Australians face in succeeding in tertiary education, Torres Straits Islander scholar, Martin Nakata, offers some important insights into pathways that break the passive welfare cycle, and emphasise achievement and effort. Nakata (2007a, p. 197), like Pearson, asserts that Indigenous people have agency in history; Indigenous people have the capacity to “actively shape new practices”, “are fighting against the odds”, and “are making and re-making ourselves in the everyday”. He (Nakata, 2007a, p. 215) recognises that “Indigenous people are entangled in a very contested knowledge space at the Cultural Interface”. Working within the interface of Western epistemology and Indigenous lived-experience, Nakata points out that tertiary Indigenous students need to have even higher levels of engagement. They have to negotiate discourses that position them, so “the development of complex analytical and writing skills” is crucial (Nakata, 2007a, p. 215). Support, in this sense, is not about lowering any bars. And even though many Indigenous people are often struggling against existing social realities (poverty, ill-health, poor housing), the challenge is to take opportunities and succeed. Blaming colonialism and passively accepting victimhood, Pearson argues, is self-defeating. Nakata acknowledges that the educational pathway is difficult, and full of tensions and contradictions, but his ideas in *Disciplining the Savages, Savaging the Disciplines* uphold the fighting spirit of achievement.

An example of the capacity to channel this fighting spirit for educational outcomes at the school level is the transformation Chris Sarra achieved at Cherbourg State School. Initially the change process was difficult and involved significant staff changes to ensure a commitment to the same goals of high expectations and standards. “We ... convinced the children that they could be stronger and smarter, by making them feel great about being Aboriginal. Importantly, we got them to understand that they can be successful, and they can still be Aboriginal” (Sarra, 2004, p. 2). The good academic performance and outcomes are linked to a sense of self belief and effort. This breaks what Scott and Brown (2005, p. 190) describe as Indigenous identity being misconstrued “to mean *don't* achieve, *don't* succeed, because success is associated with a ‘white’ identity”. If the foundations for success are established at primary and secondary levels, prospects for future academic and employment success are much higher, and Sarra’s vision and commitment at Cherbourg demonstrates radical transformation is possible when old patterns are broken.

Pearson also addresses education as a critical component of social and economic development and cultural strength. His focus is mainly on policy changes to ensure quality teachers are given incentives to teach Indigenous students in remote public schools, for research has shown teacher quality is the greatest single factor in improving educational outcomes (Pearson,

2007b). School attendance is another key factor, and he has even suggested using welfare payments to redress entrenched non-attendance. As contentious and difficult as this may be, again, it is a reciprocal relationship between the rights for a good education and the responsibility to ensure children are there to engage in a positive learning environment that Pearson emphasises. As demonstrated by Sarra, the teacher quality part of the equation is the most significant factor in strong educational outcomes because it is the teacher’s expertise that sets the ground for student learning. Learning is “two-sided and requires mutual effort and responsibility on the part of learners and teachers, whereas the dominant methods [teacher-centred and student-centred] are one-sided and place nearly complete responsibility for learning with the student” (Scaffolding Learning, 2002, p. 6). Discerning the appropriate scaffolding required for learners, and facilitating a process of active and explicit learning that leads to increasing independence, is clearly the professional responsibility of the teacher. This remains a crucial factor in providing strategically scaffolded support in higher education.

A crucial process in this scaffolding at a tertiary level is explicitly teaching the essayist literacy that underpins academic, administrative and bureaucratic domains. Greville (1999, p. 61) suggests this is a key form of cultural capital, pointing out, “It is not just access to literacy which increases power but access to cultural practices that inform and are informed by literacy ... not just ‘reading and writing’ ... but ‘literate’ practices of organising, grouping and presenting ideas ... formulating arguments, gathering evidence and so on”. In working with empowered, mature-age Indigenous students, this approach represents a systematic process that acknowledges the value of essayist literacy by making implicit knowledge explicit for Indigenous students. Such an approach does not only apply to Indigenous students, for with an increasing numbers of students from non-traditional backgrounds at the tertiary level, developing such scaffolded academic skills and learning support has become increasingly important (Dawson, 2004).

An early mistake I made in working with Indigenous students was a preoccupation with not being an assimilationist white (Memmi, 1974). Rather than focusing on the Indigenous students’ clearly stated objective of accessing sources of power in mainstream cultural institutions and contexts, initially I was trying to prove my moral credibility. It soon became very clear to me that lowering levels of achievement resulted in negative outcomes. An example of this is the way students tended to struggle upon entering mainstream degrees after “soft” access course grades. Further, there was a tendency for other Indigenous students to develop dependent relationships with tutors through support made available to them. The educator’s responsibility is to scaffold the student’s process of

active learning, rather than undermining the student's responsibility to learn through low expectations, inflated grades, hollow praise, or rescuing. As indicated above by Pearson, Sarra, and Nakata, such practices diminish the teaching and learning process, for they do not challenge students to attain realistic levels of achievement. Pearson (2007c) argues that culturally appropriate education "should not be an alibi for anti-intellectualism, romantic indigenism and a justification for substandard achievement". Clearly, then, the learning development of students should never be diminished in any efforts to be a positive and affirming teacher: it is possible to do both.

Cox (2007), drawing on Bowen and Friedman, argues patterns of dependency tend to develop when there is an overemphasis on passive forms of support and affirmation at the expense of the attainment of learning/work goals and the challenge to grow and develop students/employees. This does not mean there should be no affirmation and support, but that it needs to be genuine and meaningful, and linked to learning goal attainment. Further, the ultimate aim of the scaffolding process is to facilitate independence rather than interminable dependence.

Over the years, I learned to frame the process of developing academic skills as learning to play a game, and knowing the rules to this game. The rules require careful explanation. Knowing the rules in order to use them, and possibly to challenge them, is an important part of the scaffolding process. In doing this, I point out that there are different and competing games (discourses) in life, all of which have a political dimension. In a similar way, McCormack (1997), by explicitly comparing and contrasting Western and the Indigenous philosophy in a clear and simple way, explains how traditions inform what different cultures bring into the classroom – a whole set of codes and conventions, and ways of knowing, being and doing. There are rules to the game of accessing and developing cultural knowledge. Making such cultural links enables an explicit unpacking of such traditions, assumptions, and practices as one way of taking a flexible approach to addressing the "complexities of the cultural interface" to which Nakata (2007b, p. 13) refers.

As part of this cross-cultural interface, there is scope for Indigenous students to engage in the intellectual issues Pearson and Langton have raised. Pearson (2001b, p. 9) himself has stressed the need for critical skills as a foundation of the educational experience for Indigenous students: "I think that much of our official culture exists in order to scare the majority of the people away from acquiring the habits of critical reading and analytical thinking. And at the same time as our schools often fail to interest children in reading and social and political analysis". One of the most effective strategies of educators is to be able to engage Indigenous tertiary students in a discussion of the political consequences of issues raised by the likes of

Pearson and Langton, especially in terms of how such ideas are transformed into processes that are workable and that do not alienate communities. Indigenous students respond to such intellectual challenges to questions that concern them. In this sense, essayist literacy and critical literacy go hand-in-hand.

Such approaches to education make tacit knowledge explicit and scaffold the learning, but still require students to actively "play the game" in a positive scholarly environment. Passive learning environments, to use Pearson's terms, are poisonous.

All too often, with the very good intention of supporting our children, students, clients, employees, or constituents, we (parents, teachers, professionals, managers, politicians) "overfunction" (Cox, 2007) and thus fail to facilitate the graduated process of learning that needs to occur for growth, development, and independence. In reflecting on my teaching practice I have used the terms Langton and Pearson deploy – "co-dependency", "rescuing", "victimhood mentality" – but underlined the social/organisational patterns explained by Cox (2007). A combination of "white guilt" and "moral vanity" has clearly influenced my teaching, but a systems approach to understanding the relationship patterns that have been highlighted by Pearson and Langton suggests this is not only about individual functioning. The key to agency, once again, is taking individual responsibility within the social and political system in which we exist. Pearson puts it this way (2007a, p. 55):

My view is that the main reason why people have refused (and still refuse) to talk about responsibility is not for strong strategic reasons, but because they actually believe that better health and better education and better housing and better life expectancy and better survival of traditional languages and rights that can be enjoyed if other people – specifically government, but also the wider society – take the necessary actions to make them materialise. It amounts to this absurdity: my rights depend on you fulfilling your responsibilities to me. Who in the world has ever been saved by anyone in the way we hope whitefellas will save our people?

This is not Pearson's invention, for Old Grandfather Koori said it plainly in the 1970s: "You can't have rights without responsibilities" (Gilbert, 1978, p. 303). Pearson's notion of the radical centre, then, involves tackling problems, both at the individual and the structural level – the level of policy, legislation, and administration.

■ Conclusion

The "radical centre" agenda involves synthesising rights and responsibilities, so it is not as if rights are

no longer a concern. What Pearson (2007a, p. 55) describes as an absurdity, however, is where “my rights depend on you fulfilling your responsibilities to me”. And this clearly does not only apply to dependency and Indigenous Australians, for the over-emphasis on rights and the diminution of responsibility has been a strong social and political trend in Western cultures over the past 30 years or so. Part of this trend is always finding someone to blame, something Hughes (1993, p. 13) describes as endemic in American culture: “We create an infantilized culture of complaint, in which Big Daddy is always to blame and the expansion of rights goes on without the other half of citizenship – attachment to duties and obligations”. Breaking the pattern of blaming involves taking responsibility for what one is able to do to initiate change and the starting point is individual agency. Pearson, Langton and Mundine have highlighted the problem of passive welfare and co-dependency and have set about taking responsibility to advocate policy changes by challenging some fundamental assumptions about patterns of support. This paper has focused on how my moral vanity has been founded on an over-emphasis on rights. I have identified some links between passive welfare and rescue-based learning support, and shown how “romantic indigenism” and “victimology” are also dangerous in educational contexts. Compassion, empathy and understanding remain vital elements in teaching at all levels, but in tandem with the challenge to learn, change and develop.

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