



# Educating students to work with diverse communities –Building reflexive practice

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The aim of the paper is to present ideas to engage students in reflexive practice and prepare them for their work with diverse communities i.e. communities that are other than their own language grouping, birth country origin, colour, creed, religious or spiritual beliefs and or sexual orientation. This paper describes my understanding and approach to transformational learning and reflexivity. More specifically the paper presents explanations around the usage of concepts of reflexivity, positionality, privilege, situated knowledge and perceptions, and the intricate relationships between these concepts. This explanation is offered in the first instance as part of developing a practice in social work to build competencies.



## **Introduction**

The aim of the paper is to present ideas to engage students in reflexive practice and prepare them for their work with diverse communities i.e. communities that are other than their own language grouping, birth country origin, colour, creed, religious or spiritual beliefs and or sexual orientation. This paper describes my understanding and approach to transformational learning and reflexivity. Following the introduction, I present explanations around the usage of concepts of reflexivity, positionality, privilege, situated knowledge and perceptions, and the intricate relationships between these concepts. This explanation is offered in the first instance as part of developing a practice in social work to build competencies. Later, I present examples from my teaching with subject matters that deal with social work practice with culturally diverse and linguistic communities. The curriculum utilised in one of my teaching units in a tertiary institution and how scaffolded its contents for the students to appreciate the day living of migrants and refugees in western societies is reviewed.

## **The power of personal narratives**

Self-awareness, critical reflexivity, and analytical thinking are considered integral to social work teaching and practice (Urdang, 2010). In social work reflexivity, positionality, privilege, situated knowledge and one's own perceptions matter a great deal and seem to be intrinsically woven.

“The profession of social work has an inbuilt capacity for self-reflective process. We believe that our thoughts on our own world and our knowledge and experiences appear to influence our responses to people whom we serve. Our thoughts on our own world and our knowledge and experiences appear to influence our responses to the people whom we serve. The question that clearly needs to be raised is: has this knowledge of the world distorted/influenced our perceptions of another individual's reality/truth? (Townson and Pulla, 2015, pages;31-48).

I consider, social work teaching as a responsibility to build competencies in students of social work. In an earlier paper (Pulla, 2017), I referred to Susan Adler's approach (2011) in which she considers three-dimensional narrative inquiry in her teaching of diversity. Alder includes the following elements in her pedagogy of cultural diversity to students who aim to become school teachers:



- their personal and social lives; including their beliefs, experiences and racial biases as cultural beings
- to reflect on what ‘their interactions with families of colour’ and how these interactions
- impact on ‘their diverse knowledge base and teaching’ (Adler, 2011, p 620)

There would be some differences between me as the author and the reader and just as I would imagine that there would be some commonalities between us, such as possibility of a similar education, a passion to create a better world or a world of equality. Further similarities may include, an orientation towards human rights and perhaps a desire to see that refugees, for instance are dealt with more humanely. All these are within the realm of possible assumptions and commonalities. Although social work and human services rhetoric espouses that every human being has a right to equality, there are often a variety of constraints, public policy considerations and political angles that we are ironically asked to consider. Take for instance the more recent issue with regards to nearly 7000 asylum seekers losing their income support payments in Australia (Doherty, B, 2018). Such news generates many views on issues concerning the rights of the citizens versus new immigrants and or asylum seekers around entitlements. The question that needs to be asked is what needs to occur to ensure that a more informed conversation takes place that does not compromise the human values within our societies?

This is where I begin teaching positionality: I begin with a statement that as individuals we bear multiple social identities and that reflection needs to occur on these positions, on an ongoing basis especially when working with people in our social work role. I begin assisting my students and my audiences with the reflection of my own, as an Indian born Australian living in two cultures. — My thinking clearly evokes an Indian and an Australian out of me and at times difficult as to which one of this is superimposing the other. I listen to what others say and that gives me many opportunities to appreciate the mainstream thinking and even non-mainstream thinking here in Australia. I take pride in identifying myself as an Indian born Australian citizen. Each of us have our own stories to tell. No two stories will ever be the same just as no two lives are ever lived, and or internalised, in the same way. According to Takacs, “[o]nly I have lived my life; only you have in yours [and] it is only by listening to others can [we] become aware of the conceptual shackles imposed by [our] identit[ies] and experiences...we need to [and can] move to respecting,

appreciating and then celebrating diverse perspectives as they provide the opportunity to experience both the world and ourselves more richly and deeply' (2003: 29)

### **Reflexivity, Positionality and Privilege**

Some conceptions are personal and the view that we lend to them comes from our experience. Reflexivity, positionality, privilege, situated knowledge and perceptions, are some of those concepts that draw a great deal from our own perspectives. In my narratives above, arguably, reflexivity has provided a central point from which as an individual I can consider the entity to which I am connected to or co-dependent upon. Anthropologists and sociologists see reflexivity, as a concept, and a challenge of epistemological assumptions. Concern regarding the element of subjectivity and the production of scientific knowledge were at first articulated as early as the late 1800's (McCorkel & Myers, 2003; Salzman, 2002). The works of the ethnographers during the 1960-1970s (Dowling, 2009; Allen et al., 2008) and others in 1980s started to burgeon a wide variety of discussion and critique on subjectivity and bias (Salzman, 2002). Simultaneously, feminists took to this and formulated other concepts of empathy, rapport, social action and began giving voice to the 'marginalised' (Rose, 1997; Dowling, 2009; Crang, 2002; McCorkel & Myers 2003). Thus, feminism and poststructuralism seem to have opened geography to voices other than those of the dominant white, western, middle-class, heterosexual men. This allowed for the discipline of geography, which, as Lowe and Short put it, "neither dismisses nor denies structural factors, but allows a range of voices to speak" (England, 1994:242).

Since its inception, it has become both a malleable and ductile concept with a multitude of variations in its application, articulation and grew into the centre of much debate; some of which were argued as concerns in relation to its application, validity and capacity to be manipulated for personal interests (Nagar, 2003; Nencel, 2014; Crang, 2002; Mohd.Salleh and Mohd.Saat 2010; Jansson, 2010; McCorkel & Myers 2003). And this is perhaps no one agrees that bias of any nature is ever acceptable. Anthropologists seem to view reflexivity as a continual social process in which an individual is constantly aware of his or her own being, actions or thoughts and how he or she may influence both interpretation and responses to situations, interactions or the world at large (Nazaruk, 2011; White, 2001). Reflexivity can be described as circular by nature due to interaction and composed knowledge being a continuous activity.



‘Knowledge gets constructed by interaction between the questioner and the world’  
(Takacs, 2003:31).

Social psychologist George Herbert Mead (cited by Salzman,2002:) describes reflexivity as ‘the turning-back of [an] experience [or social interaction] of the individual upon himself... which enable[s] the individual to take the attitude of the other toward himself’ which he states has the capacity for the individual to become more self-aware, create shifts in thinking and knowledge baselines and gain more understanding and insights Myerhoff and Ruby (cited by Nazaruk, 2011) support this assertion.

I share my positionality and its influences on my thinking and let my students and audiences do the same. The question is: How accurate is this understanding of another individuals’ ‘location’ given we only have our own lived experiences and understandings in which to provide a context? I have attempted to explain this by means of utilising our personal experiences. The following reflects how I grew up in my family home in India.

I was born in a Brahmin caste<sup>1</sup> in India and that gives many people a lot of privilege, social, economic, and even political. I did not realise that I was privileged until I came into my teens. Did I feel good about it? Not sure. However, was I at a stage to feel uncomfortable about it? Not sure too. Would I describe that as being ambivalent? Yes. But I recall I never looked down upon any one from any lower caste- I learnt I guess I was from the highest caste as it was drilled into me and at all festivities we had something which probably was different from others. Even the priest in the temple treated us differently. With my friends, did caste come up? Did I bring caste when I played? Did I bring caste when I shared my lunch and ran into classes or rain- never? Why was I so? I was becoming aware that something was not right. Was I reflecting? Surely, I was ... All of us are in the habit of developing this trait – to reflect, early on. Did I dare to mention to my grandmother, uncles and aunts, they were alive then, with whom I played - never. Was I

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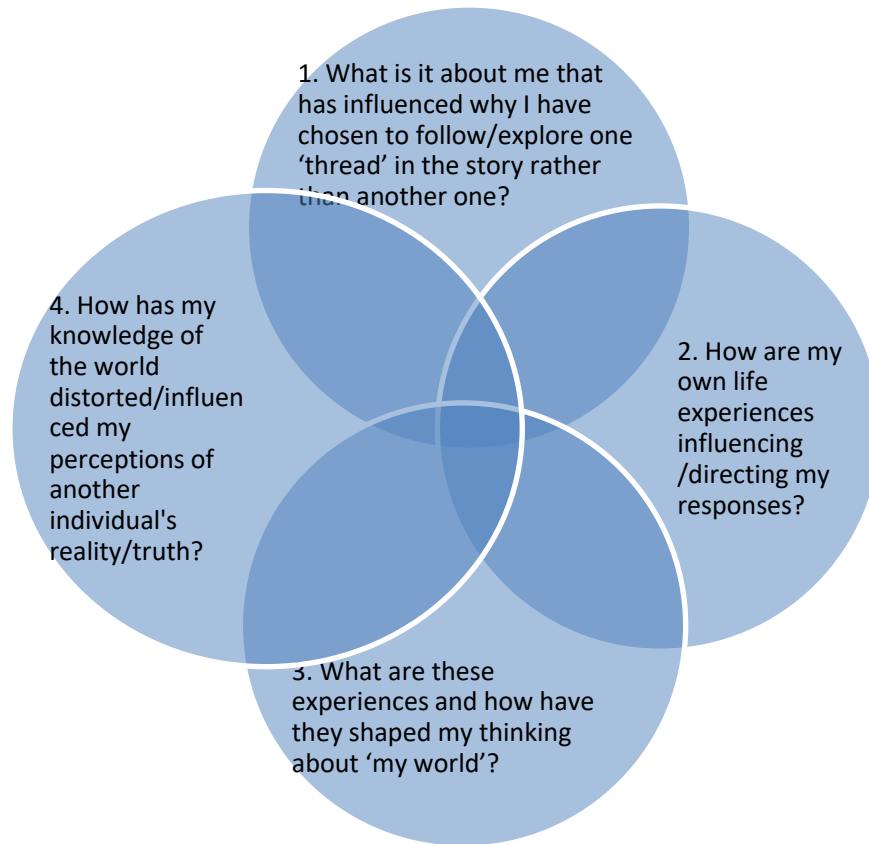
<sup>1</sup> Indian society is stratified socially by an endogamous hereditary system known as the caste system (Bhattacharyya, 2009; 2013). It is divided into four Varnas: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, which are further divided into several sub-hierarchies, locally known as jatis and upa-jatis. This article is however beyond the scope of discussing the caste system of India in detail, but as per the Varna system, the second author belongs to the highest varna.



afraid to tell? Yes. Would they ban my play? Was I afraid of that? I did feel that they may have less tolerance to that. My mother was different. However, it was in my 13th year my mother asked me whom did I play with at school? It was ingrained in me to tell the truth when asked. I said the truth.

Did my mother object? Not at all. Except that I was told not to eat their food as they eat cow meat. Beef was not the term used by my mother. She used the word cow meat. I was pained for a moment. I did not like any one eating meat to start with. But cow meat? I always wanted to tell my friends not to eat meat and not at all to eat cow meat. But I never dared. Instead, I used to ask if there was meat in the food that they shared with me. I guess I feared losing friends. I liked being with them, I loved them. I was told that you cannot oblige everyone but can speak obligingly. I grew up in those times in India'

The above personal narrative is an example of how one could develop biases or attempt to tease them out. As social workers we wish to contribute to minimise oppression and move more towards eliminating it. Privilege can be earned or un-earned. However, in many societies it is still an entitlement for a certain group and excludes many others, such as being white in the western nations or like being born of high caste in India. As suggested before, reflexivity, positionality, privilege, situated knowledge and perceptions are intertwined and seem to cohabit in the same arena. Operationally they shape, define and lend refinement to each other while existing and developing together. Therefore, it is crucial to begin recognizing these concepts as separate entities to begin with although connected. These concepts keep shifting, changing and have rippling effects. Meadow (2013), sees the above concepts, remaining in fluidity. Asking such questions such as in the following diagram may assist us in our reflexivity and that of our students.



There are other crucial elements to reflexivity and one of them is around the social worker/researcher holding 'biases' or making conscious efforts to work through and eliminate them. Biases stem 'not from having ethical and political positions – this is inevitable – but from not acknowledging them' (Griffith, 1998:133).

Reflexive analysis and practices are affiliated to one's own epistemological preference. In other words, their belief/ethos expressed in relation to the origin, nature, methods and limits of human knowledge (Nazaruk, 2011; Perumal, 2012; Raju, 2002). Despite best intentions and varied strategies to minimise it, it is the therapist/ social worker or researcher who seems to have power within the relationship (Mellor et al, 2014; Moore, 2012; Raju, 2002). Nencel (2014) states that Pillow (2003:178) describes reflexivity as 'a tool of the privileged' as it is only the researcher who has the capacity for reflexivity in the text. Yet, another aspect for consideration is that as 'we labour to place ourselves at some distance from those we wish to analyse, they are also labouring, watching us, making meaning of us' (Meadow, 2013: 468). In its bare essence, reflexivity simply asks the question: "How do we know what we know?" Hence, asking and then reflecting on this question



allows for the deconstruction of our positionality (Raju, 2002), and I think it is important for us in social work.

Let me further reflect from my own narrative to see what I would add because of my living in Australia and as an academic. This is my twenty sixth year in the profession of social work in Australia. In this country I arrived as an academic, did a three and half year stint in NTU as the Head of the School (now known as Charles Darwin University) and moved into direct practice where I was privileged to understand about social issues and ways to respond to them in a positive way. On a reflection, I find that my interest in the efficacy of core elements of social work across cultures, unconditional ability to listen to the narratives of people with whom I work, and my humility, that shaped me and built an approach or epistemology in my journeys into teaching and direct practice. As a practitioner, I was open to learning and as a teacher I remain a learner. I have returned to teaching about seven years ago.

In India. I grew in times when radical social work was believed to bring in structural changes to assist individuals and groups to meet their needs (Reisch and Andrews, 2001; Lee, 2001; Langan and Lee, 1989). Radical social work practice never excluded anyone from society particularly the poor and at the same time was resentful of charity, pacifiers and concessions being offered to them. The Radical practitioners agitated for structural changes and angered at structural adjustments and tinkering. The state was constantly reminded of its constitutional obligations to the poor and the vulnerable and expected the state to look at poverty at its roots and in the structure. In the late seventies, Social work in India was hardly revered compared to its counterparts in the west, yet the social workers who came out of the limited number of schools of social work in India were a brand made of fire. Many of them questioned the inequities in the society. As practitioners and as academics they were conscious of the intersections of marginality, inequality, gender and influence of western models of development. Our approaches in India was on a continuum of system adjustment, subversion and very vocal and radical departures to usher in new systems development.

When I arrived here in Australia in 1992, I saw that the western social work was similar in rhetoric. In the western world social work academics accept inclusion of 'human rights, social justice and support for the disenfranchised' as part of their professional concerns (Briskman, Pease and Allan, 2009, p 6). Yet, the irony seems that much of Australian social work is laid in conservative practice environment (Briskman, Pease and Allan, 2009; Pulla, 2017). I find AASW code of ethics continues





to exhort social workers to affirm human rights and challenge unjust practices. I think the code of ethics offers a serious opportunity for Australian social work, which we ought not to let go.

These days, I gain an impression that both within our ranks of social work and the rest of the society seems to perceive social work as a mechanism that deals with the dysfunction that arises in each of our social systems or societies. If we chose to elect such pathways, we may begin to perceive individuals and groups in need as candidates to be adjusted in the society and that to me, is a grave mistake. For a beginner this understanding may just be the beginning, however we need to critically view as to why these people are missing out? That critical element will change our perspective and move us beyond that rudimentary rational response to people's needs. Certainly, it will take us to a framework of rights and entitlements.

When I studied social work in Tata Institute in India, with Late Professor M.S. Gore, amongst others, I was taught to see recognise the three core competencies in social worker. An ability to practice, an ability to know and an ability to be a social worker. The last part 'being a social worker, is a big thing' and honourable, we were told in the late seventies. Pawar and Anscombe (2015), addressed the importance of social work being, in the context of the common usage of combination phrases such as 'thinking, doing and being' (Pawar and Anscombe, 2015-p15). They urge us to construct the concept of 'being' in terms of physical, organic, mental/emotional, social /relational and spiritual /existential dimensions.

'being involves reognising that humans are both shaped by and are shapes of the environment- physically, socially, ecologically and spiritually' (Pawar and Anscombe, 2015-p15).

I see contemporary Australian social work as a bag of corporatised, mainstreamed and fragmented activities and I believe that its current pedagogy is unable to offer genuine opportunities to practice 'of knowing, doing, and being' (Larrison and Korr, 2013, p 200). In my experiential approach I have utilised my own narrative of over fifteen years of Australian social work practice, relevantly often superimposing it with by comparable and contrastable third world experiences from India and other countries in Asia and countries from the Balkan region in Europe where I had opportunities to practice and observe other practitioners. Certainly, my research and writings into violations of human rights, such as the Lhotsampa refugees from the so called Shangri-La of Peace-Bhutan (Pulla, 2016), and reproductive rights of tribal women, (Mamidi and Pulla, 2013) and other permissible narrative reflections from my practice in the field of disabilities have also assisted in



shaping a distinctive approach of reflective practice (Townson, and Pulla, 2015). Such distinction does not happen overnight even for academics, it happens only when we give ourselves the permission to be an active academic rather than passive and dependent on the expertise of others (Beattie, 2002).

### **Positionality as an efficacy**

“If our goal is to transform the power hierarchies embedded in services planning as in social work and knowledge production in social sciences, it is clearly not going to happen merely through a discussion of how we represent others and ourselves” (Nagar, 2003:65). I believe that, Nagar (2003) epitomises what appears to be an ongoing ripple of questioning in relation to the efficacy of positionality (Salzman, 2002; Harley, Jolivette, McCormick, and Tice, K. 2002). Positionality yields several sub categories in relation to its contours. Positionality displays characteristics such as; being multifaceted, being an extension to reflexivity, and possible contradicting views of placement on the privilege versus under privilege on a continuum (Harley et al., 2002 Crossa, 2012; Ganga, & Scott 2006). In addition, it co-occurs with the same principles of reflexivity meaning that introspection of the circular process -how we relate to the world / how the world relates to us- is crucial (Bhattacharyya, 2004). To illustrate further, I will return to my further reflection on my positionality within the Indian society, experiencing the ‘caste’ and what it does when we become aware of it. After acquiring degrees in sciences and in journalism, I studied social work and turned myself into an academic. I pursued my doctoral work on the caste system in India and compared it with the marginalised and the minorities around the world. When I looked at my student peer group, I realised that most of us possessed power, wealth, education and status of higher castes (there were many of them in the doctoral cohorts but that belonged to other higher castes, not just Brahmins. But, perhaps there were more Brahmins, probably the highest- in that University where I completed my doctorate.

I was becoming aware of the exploitation of the lower castes in India. This caste consciousness clearly articulates the positionality. I detested my position of belonging to a higher caste, but there wasn’t anything I could do as caste is an ascribed status. Mere critical awareness was not sufficient – I needed to do things, which were within my control and privilege. I began assisting some students belonging to lower caste in India in a humble way offering free tuitions and a scholarship that my wife and I set up for a while. It gave a few dollars a week allowing some of the normal things that all of us used to do amongst the so-called ‘privileged lot’ like going out, having coffee



or coke with mates. Someone described this attitude of mine as washing away of some guilt that I wear. What guilt? I did not do anything? I could not buy that argument. I was shaped never to think of myself as someone who patronises the underprivileged. I could not change everything around me particularly the caste system. Maybe I took just some steps that were within my realm. I followed my heart and incidentally those who like the metaphor of heart, head and hands in social work would see that it is the heart that actually allows us to 'be the social worker' which Pawar and Anscombe (2015) write about.

Similar to reflexivity, the concept of positionality too has a history of fair share in academic debates (Skelton, 2009; Sherif, 2001; Herr and Anderson, 2005; Tarrant, 2014; Rhoads, 1997; O'Connor, 2004; Sultana, 2007; Weiner-Levy, & Rabia Queder, 2012; Mellor et al. 2014; Ganga & Scott. 2006; Merriam et al., 2001; Muhanna, 2014; Fletcher, 2014; Ahmed, Hundt, and Blackburn 2011). I consider Meadow (2013), provided us the best understanding of positionality as being fluid, having multiple ways of manifesting and unpredictable in several ways. In its basic entity, the labelling of oneself as having a 'insider'/'outsider' positionality is categorised by the sub-sections which we exist in, that is; gender, sexuality, ethnicity, culture, etc. (Harley et al., 2002; Rhoads, 1997; Merriam et al. 2001). Positionality as a clear declaration is more evident in research literature than in practice contexts, therefore a pertinent question is what happens within a counselling and in social work relationship? For instance, when we face people from other than non-English background, beyond visual cues of ethnicity what else do we need to consider? How will we draw our inferences on or around their cultural and religious beliefs? What happens beyond the visible cues of gender, sexuality and disability? And possible cues/clues connected to more specific settings in which we met them for example, hospital, welfare, home for the frail aged and in what contexts? etc. I believe that often a deliberate planned statement of declaration of positionality may not happen in the field. This de-layering of the therapist's and social work role or conceptual place or 'location' would become a gradual process. Some of the pitfalls associated with this consist of; perceived imbalance of power, our inability to provide the people a choice with regards to the technique that is perhaps more ideal for them and we could pursue after explaining to them. Our power seems to decide that we would use cognitive behavioural therapy, crisis intervention, etc., How would it be if we viewed them through the lens that values strengths approach to people? (Pulla, 2017). At the end of the day I advocate strengths approach in social work and human services delivery as it removes the workers from the role of expert, makes them think critically and practice humility.

## **The notion of privilege**

I will examine the notion of privilege and how this affects the discourse and practice of social work. The concept of ‘privilege’ is structural and it appears that its core framework consists of a basic continuum of privilege versus under privilege. Placement on this continuum however is more complicated as it involves intricately involved parts. However, privilege(s) can be separated into many overarching categories; gender, race/ethnicity, culture, class, sexuality, disability, economic status, education status, skills, religion/ faiths, class, emotional strength, physical appearance/attractiveness (McCorkel & Myers 2003; Pease, 2010). The above variables if found in combinations, tend to capacitate or incapacitate people. For instance, two men can be connected by gender however different to each other in relation to other variables; two Caucasian individuals with university degrees are connected by race/ethnicity and education status but different to each other by any other variable; – a group of individuals connected by culture, economic status, and similar life experiences but divided by their spirituality, sexuality or embedded values. Privilege(s) can occur randomly through birth, some are achieved by hard work, some occur because of misfortune and some are conscious, deliberate decisions. It is perhaps fair, albeit controversially, to say that the only fixed variables are race/ethnicity, disability and sexuality.

The concept of privilege is clearly a social construction. Take for example the concept of social inclusion versus social exclusion-no one willingly chooses to go into the social exclusion category. Privilege can be deep-seated and established. It is both well entrenched and has been lengthily sustained by laws, rules, institutions, traditions, customs, conventions, expectations, individual perception, generational thinking (Pease, 2010), and basically, the ease of gravitating towards or drifting into the familiar rather than the unease of change – a common human trait. There is no doubt that humanity is striving hard to minimise these inequities associated with the current constructs of privilege at many levels through discrimination laws, basic human rights platform, and many inroads have been made. the Universal Declaration Of Human Rights, (1948) being one example.

But one must ask the questions –

- 1) Is it enough? Some do not seem to think so - Gracie Jin (2013) argues that “[i]n a society masquerading as post-racial, it is still only the white man who can speak authoritatively for every man. People of colour, on the other hand, are expected to speak only for themselves.”

2) Is it ever achievable? 90 years ago, Mahatma Gandhi led the freedom movement in India resulting in the transformation of an ‘inner psychological structure of fear and submission... into one of courage, self-respect, self-assertion and a thirst for freedom’ I pose this question to the readers – Is this your impression? How does your positionality resonate with its validity/truth?

3) What are the ramifications? No doubt, each reader will have his or her own answer. Briefly, I will delve at the concept of the situated knowledges and perception. I continue to ponder the questions as to what privilege is? Being fortunate or being privileged may mean having adequate access to such things as running water, freedom of speech, adequate health care, sense of safety/security as a result of having sufficient food, a permanent home, sense of belonging, just the opposite of a Bhutanese refugees who lived nearly twenty five years in huts they called homes that used tarpaulin and bamboo, in Nepal, for 25 years ( Pulla, 2016).

### **Situated Knowledge and Perception**

Irrevocably attached to privilege is the concept of situated knowledges and is therefore, just as convoluted. Our working definition is that situated knowledges are a social process whereby knowledge is co-constructed. It is both situated in a specific context and embedded within a social and physical environment (Haraway, 1991; Rose, 1997; Caretta, 2014). Learning theorists state this process occurs through socialisation, visualisation, and imitation (Bandura, 1977; Parke, 1979; Miller, 2011). Situated knowledges are “marked knowledges that produce maps of consciousness” (Haraway, 1991 p 111). “They reflect our locationality (historical, national, and generational) and positionality (race, gender, class, nationality, sexuality) acknowledging how the dynamics of where we are always affects our viewpoint” (Wolf, cited by Thorne, 2010).

For this paper, I will explain perceptions as our impressions, attitudes and/or understanding at which we arrive by our observations and thoughts. This can be positive and pleasant or can also be negative likened to a prejudice. The more we see the more we seem to accept and affiliate them, suggesting a strong role of memory in formulation of perceptions. Simultaneously, perception is influenced by the capacity of the individual for intuition, discernment, insight, acuity, observation and sensitivity (Styles, 2005; Winkler et al., 2010). Thus, the individual notions of reflexivity, positionality, privilege, situated knowledge and perceptions are inextricably interlinked; the central common threads being that they shape/shift our ‘location’ and are uniquely individualised.



### **In the context of social work**

In the above sections of this paper, I have attempted to provide a substratum for constantly examining the efficacy of the current application of positionality and the proposition of an empowering understanding within the profession of social work and human services. In the next section, I will reflect on my teaching of a social work unit, that imparts social work practice with cultural and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, I do raise similar principal question with my students in social work:

- How has this knowledge of the world distorted/influenced our perceptions of another individual's reality/truth?

My premise in setting the above question is to encourage the students to thoughtfully answer their own understanding and present it as their own truth. It is their call. I recognise that such positionality is still fraught with biases and pitfalls (Townson, and Pulla, 2015). But then it is also their truth as they perceive it. As a teacher, my own epistemology strongly deploys such reflexivity. My narratives assist the students to grow intellectually and organically. In Gramscian terms, a thinking individual contributes to action (Gramsci, 1987). Gramscian counter hegemony suggests that development of a transformation power arises from within an individual. and here I see the role and purpose of social work teaching in preparing such 'organic intellectuals' that would partake in fundamental transformation of society (Gramsci, 1987: 161-323). I assist my students to delineate and deconstruct their own professional and personal experiences through my auto ethnographic accounts and some of my research findings based on grounded theory approaches (Pulla, 2016). Often, my generalisation and experiences resonate with my students and audience and they seem to see some parallels in the lives of people that they know (Ellis 2004).

I believe that my colleagues in social work, world over are involved in a challenge to create a body of knowledge for social work and reshaping it with a view to make it into an acceptable theory. Weick, several years ago made a comment that makes sense even today that this theory building penchant has driven most of our teaching fraternity to nuts so much so causing 'a forged alliance with a scientific model of knowledge building in our drive to gain a professional status' (Weick, 1993 Page-29), Neuman and Blundo, 2000). The history of social work is one continuous search of professional status recognition and legitimacy (Neuman and Blundo, 2000) and clearly, it seems to me that it is also a continuous struggle. I wish we spent more time in building robust practice



and demonstrating better outcomes for the people whom we serve our people. Such a task would have taken our profession right through a constructivist rationale. Constructivist pedagogy, I believe offers us an opportunity to set ideas, build clarity in intent, structure and content. Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development and its concerns are all about the wellbeing of mankind. The profession has an acceptable agenda worldwide to deal with 'social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people (IASSW/IFSW, 1994). Its core values seem to be social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for cultural diversity (IASSW/IFSW, 1994). The theoretical base arrives from social and behavioural sciences. As a profession with pronounced engagement with people it has developed its practice approaches. Social work seems to be a fit candidate for constructivist agenda as most of us position ourselves as mentors that allows us to scaffold concepts and theories to our aspirants in social work.

As teachers I see our role in assisting our students to prepare them to develop a dialogue with the real people with whom they will work in future. Our endeavours through class room exercises and simulated case materials, use of videos and their own role plays for self-interrogation, peer evaluation assist a great deal of student learning. One good thing that I can see with constructivist approach is that there is no pre-conceived idea and it allows the learner to build his or her own cognitive map unique to their experience and their need (Neuman and Blundo, 2000). Simulated scenarios assist the students learning processes such as skill development in areas such as coping, building resilience and making people empowered, which to start with seems to agree with the core business of social work (Pulla, 2013, Mlcek and Pulla,2014).

### **Social work with culturally and linguistically diverse communities**

I present in this section, my reflections of teaching subject matters pertaining to social work with culturally and linguistically diverse communities. The Australian Social work degree in general involves a 4-year study in which aspirants spend three quarters of their time in the first two years of the programme undertaking studies in psychology sociology, liberal arts and related allied health subjects. This strategy in my view provides an opportunity to build a broad understanding of the environment and society ( Graduate Attribute No. 2); inculcate respect for the dignity of the individual and for the diversity of humanity (Graduate Attribute No.1) and a very strong opportunity to undertake the practice of ethical decision making (Graduate Attribute No.3) thus



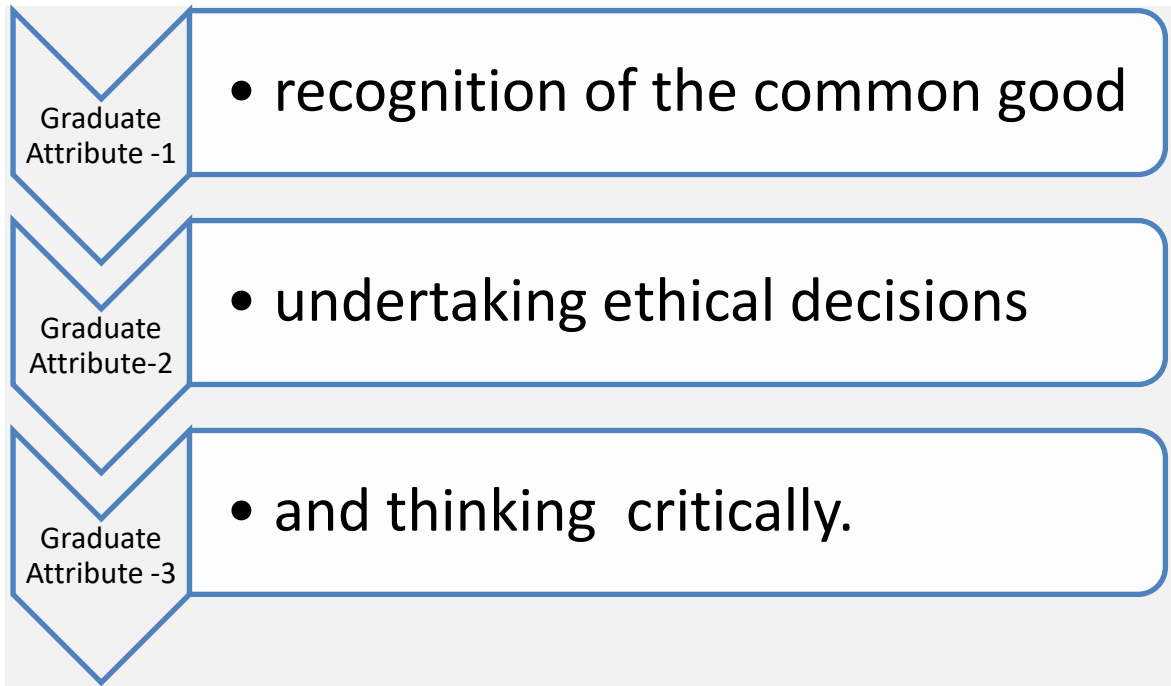


providing a good flow of 'guidance to intended learning outcomes' of a programme or the constituent courses' (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p.11), in this instance, the social work degree programme.

The four-year Bachelor of Social Work and Bachelor of Social Work (Honours) degree is an AASW-accredited qualification. The Bachelor of Social Work provides education in social work that is informed by a critical understanding of the social science disciplines and orientated to the professional values and practices of the social work profession. Within the course there is an emphasis on social justice, human rights, and on achieving the best possible outcomes for the most marginalised and disadvantaged members of the community. My experience of teaching in three universities, the Northern Territory University (now Charles Darwin University), the Charles Sturt University and the Australian Catholic University, particularly the second-year students is that they have been in their formative years with limited exposure to social work issues. Their profile of awareness with social issues and experience has been varied. They seem to come with innocence, naivety, coupled with elementary ideas as to what social work is all about? Some of them came straight after grade 12 from schools where career guidance or aptitude matching has occurred prior to their entry into the tertiary portals and but had no understanding or exposure to the harder issues of the profession where people may need substantial assistance. In nearly ten years of my teaching in Australian social work, I also taught a small number of mature age students that bring with them experience, personal narratives of real life, pre-existing skills from employment in broader social care roles. Some of them undertaking the carers role within their families for a person with disability or have a person with mental health issues. These issues are closer to social work profession (Fraser and Baker, 2014). The student groups that I have seen through have both some academically committed and a good number of them were keen to finish the degree and as they are aware they will get a 'decent job' (Biggs and Tang's (2011). There are also a substantial number of students in the middle order. These students with a right amount of prodding and introduction of small group work, improve their commitment towards learning and eventually display right inclination and responsibility towards participative learning. These students respond to simulated scenarios better as they appear to be in the pedagogical tradition of 'problem based learning' (Biggs and Tang, 2011, pp 5-7).



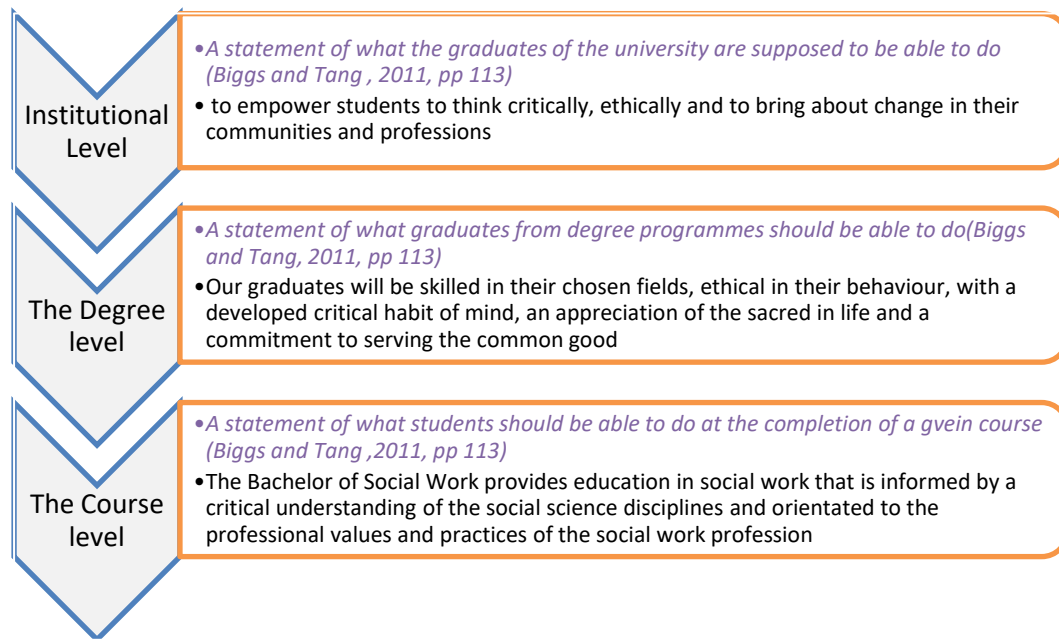
I chose to critically analyse, how my teaching endeavours attempted to assist the student to acquire the overarching demonstrable abilities such as respecting the dignity of everyone. For this paper I have utilised the graduate attributes,<sup>2</sup> as follows:



In the following diagram I have adapted Biggs and Tang's (2011) explanation to clarify the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) relating to the subject matters of skills in cultural diversity and working with non-English speaking background families.

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<sup>2</sup> These are the graduate attributes at Australian Catholic University.



Adapted from Biggs and Tang (2011, pp 113) and contextualised to social work ILOs<sup>3</sup>

Universally many attributes have now become the expectations for responsible citizenship in a global society such as ‘Critical thinking, ethical practice, creativity, independent problem-solving skills, communication and team work skills’ (Biggs and Tang, 2011, p-114). The above attributes resonate with social work and implicitly demand of its aspirants to acquire them. They may appear simple and generic yet in my view can only be acquired through practicing reflections. I have been part of the national teaching team of three that began drafting contents for the course and began teaching from 2015. I have contributed my own experiential learning (Kolbe, 1984), as an immigrant academic from a non-English background, in writing this course and continued to share my Australian lived in experience of the last two and half decades with the students at appropriate junctures while teaching and tutoring the groups of students. Scholarship of teaching is all about improving student learning within any discipline, by re-collecting one’s own narratives and undertaking a deliberate reflection on those select narratives and communicating results to the students and to disseminate across teaching and learning within the discipline (Biggs and Tang 2011). On many occasions narratives utilised from my life and from my research created that opportunity for learning for the students. Such learning scenarios allow, both students and teachers

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved from [http://www.acu.edu.au/courses/undergraduate/social\\_work/social\\_work/bachelor\\_of\\_social\\_work](http://www.acu.edu.au/courses/undergraduate/social_work/social_work/bachelor_of_social_work) and from [http://www.acu.edu.au/about\\_acu/our\\_university/mission\\_and\\_profile](http://www.acu.edu.au/about_acu/our_university/mission_and_profile)



to construct and co-create their own subjective representations of what they see and what they hear. This is how I interpret the core process of constructivism.

One's own experiential learning is defined by Houle as 'education that occurs as a direct participation in the events of life' (Houle, 1980, p 221). Teaching this unit offered me opportunities to further my experiential learning (Kolbe (1984) of my direct participation in Australian society. I have reflected on contemporary changes that have taken place in areas such as migration policies, during the last two decades in the classroom. My narratives and relevant policy references have assisted the class to appreciate the changes in public policy relating to migrants and refugees appear to me. The following table illustrate what actions I undertook and the possible critical reflection in the light of some select theoretical frameworks from the field of education.

What did I do?	Reflection through theoretical framework
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I shared my concrete experiences</li><li>• I shared my observation and self-reflection</li><li>• Assisting with the formation of abstract concepts and asking the students to view similar narratives in the contemporary scenario of public policy.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Vygotsky's Social Development Theory and Kolb's (Kolb, 1984) idea of experiential learning</li><li>• Transformational reflection (Biggs &amp; Tang, 2011)</li><li>• Becoming the knowledgeable other (Teacher) Mediate their social environments</li><li>• Peer collaboration and the student's ability solving the problem</li></ul>

### **Discussion:**

I seem to have followed two attributes of constructivist theory, that teaching ought to facilitate active learning and that learning ought to be learner driven (Biggs and Tang, 2011). As a teacher my own transformational reflection assisted in development of my own theory of teaching. Biggs and Tang (2011) define transformational reflection 'as a theory of to reflect with and a context of experiences as objects of reflection' (ibid, p 55). Specific to the subject matters that I taught the intended learning outcomes that my students ought to demonstrate relate to:

understanding of the impact of the Australian migration history, related social policy with an emphasis on how this impacts on the experiences of a range of migrant, refugee and asylum seeker populations and communities fare; and have class room based opportunities to develop competencies in cross cultural practice and service delivery

The concepts and processes that I have chosen to include in the course content were based on the view ‘that the knowledge, understanding acceptance and sensitivity to cultural and human diversity is prerequisite for effective work with our people’ (Chau, 1990, p-124). This approach does meet the partial requirements of the professional social work degree while the final test of acquisition of the students’ professionalism is determined only after completion of a series of field placements. From my understanding of constructive alignment ( Biggs, 2006), I can appreciate that the main strategies while setting up the contents for teaching was to ensure incremental building in lines with the ILOs. I have attempted to capture some aspects of approach to the ILOs in the following table.

Working with culturally and linguistically diverse people- Subject contents analysed

ILO Intended Learning Outcomes	Lecture Contents in brief	Tutorial exercise	Reflection	Theoretical frameworks
Articulate the impact of key historical and social policy issues on the experiences of migrant, refugee and asylum seeker populations	Australian migration policy; Social policies concerning migrants, refugees and asylum seekers; racism, prejudice and white privilege	Defining diversity, culture Introducing cultural responsiveness Exploring one’s own identity	Utilisation of reflective writing	1.Active learning, (Stewart, 2013) 2. Promoting learning behaviours- by participation in tutorials (Nulty, 2011), Sequenced learning (Nulty, 2011)

<p>2. Apply key cultural theories within a framework of social justice and human rights cultural social work practice.</p> <p>3. Demonstrate cross-cultural skills for social work practice</p>	<p>Globalisation, culture and language Human rights and social and economic justice, Theories of oppression &amp; discrimination of acculturation; trauma; oppression; discrimination Cultural competence frameworks</p>	<p>Exploring one's own cultural identities Community profiles Resources, Using the census (ABS) Small groups, discussions of the community profile. What migration policies have affected this community? How? What social policies have impacted this community? How?</p>	<p>Effective cross-cultural practice supported by opinion with data</p> <p>Assisting students to 'make contextually bounded arguments that balance different positions, each set within a multidimensional framework' (Nulty, 2011, p194)</p>	<p>Relativism (Perry, 1975)</p> <p>1.Active learning (Stewart, 2013) 2. Promoting learning behaviours- by participation in tutorials (Nulty, 2011), Sequenced learning (Nulty, 2011)</p>
<p>6. Critically reflect on personal and professional values when working with people</p>	<p>Cross cultural skill development Assessment skills:</p>	<p>Working with older migrants and refugees</p>	<p>Reflection</p>	

### Assessment Tasks

I will now briefly address how the assessment tasks were set for student learning. Sequenced learning is very important (Nulty,2011). Students ought to grasp the concepts; begin early to apply the concepts in tutorials and in reviewing simulated case studies and feel confident to reapply them to real life situations as they would eventually practice in social work.

The first assessment task is a reflective piece. It begins with their personal reflection. The students introduce themselves and focus on their cultural identity and further down they reflect on how their cultural identity informs their professional identity and practice as a social worker. This is a short piece of 400 words: 'Exploring one's own cultural identities.' This task had a prior week's reading of set Community profiles available from the federal government department. Within the tutorial the students are expected to utilise the census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and within the small groups of four they are encouraged to construct a community profile and raise questions such as

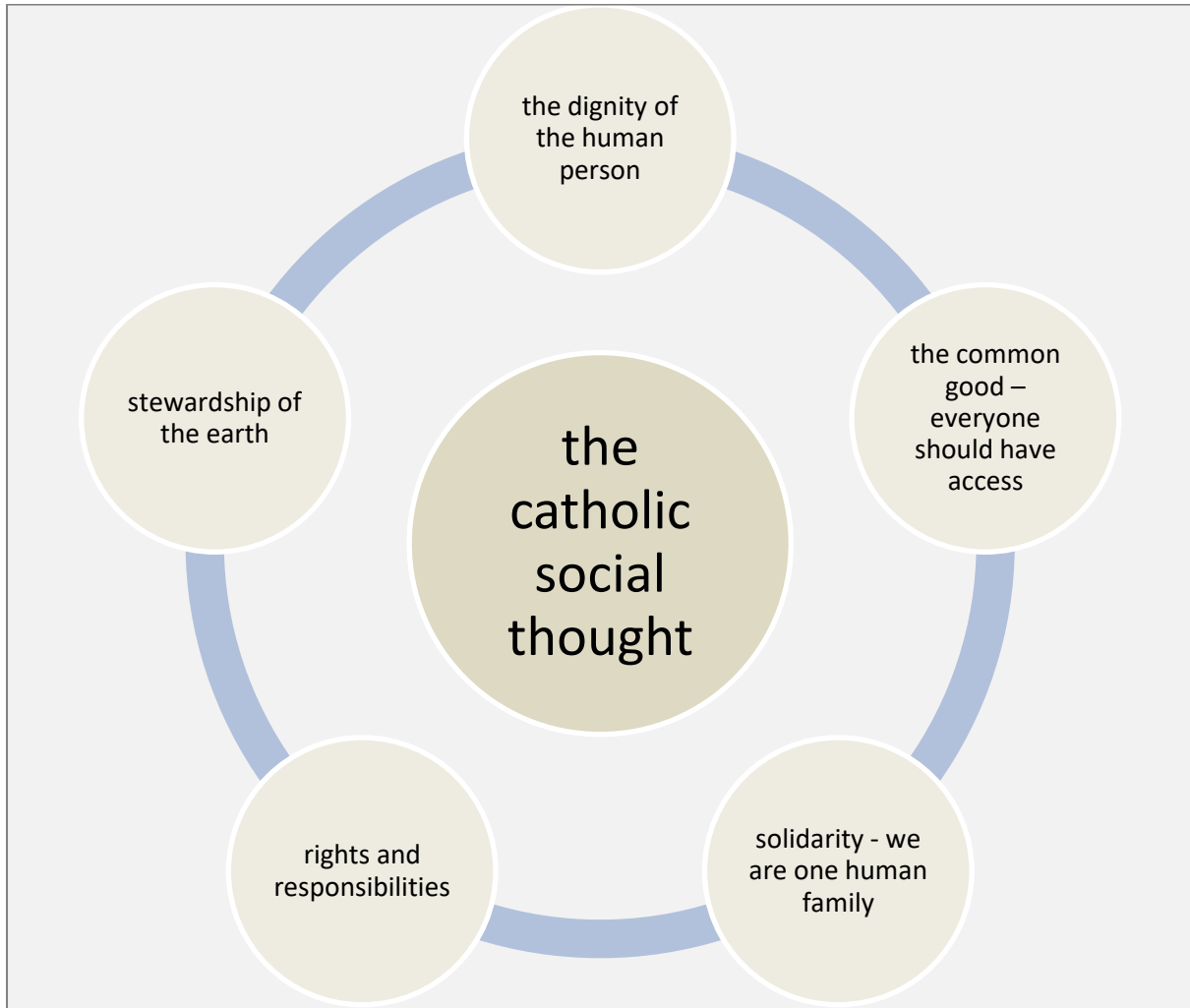
- What migration policies would have affected this community and how?
- What social policies would have impacted or impacting on this community and how?



Such exercises utilise problem centred learning method (Kearsley, 2010, Knowles, 1984) allow the students to look at the data with which they are working and to look at the likely opportunities that might come in future. The second part of the assessment is a short essay of 800 words that expects the student to choose an ethnic group from a pre-selected list that is provided to the students. This is an opportunity to display their analytical and research skills in generating a culturally different, profile from their own. The third assessment relates to the concepts of racism and the possibility of social work interventions. On a reflection this final assessment task met the needs of the 'academically bright and intrinsically motivated' (Nulty 2011, p.195), but also provided an equal opportunity to many middle order students who may not necessarily be bright but are ambitious to be social workers at the grassroots, in schools and take up work in the communities. These are students who are very capable with designing practical strategies that will attack prejudice and uphold the dignity of all people irrespective of race, colour, creed and sexual orientation. Clearly the central message in this subject is about the dignity of humanity. In classroom settings we will always have a mix of students some chasing 'intrinsic motivations' and some chasing 'external indicators' such as grades (Biggs and Tang, 2011, p 55). As teachers we need to become aware and work with them with different strategies. If we become aware of the nature of the student's motivations we will be able to develop strategies to provide them with information and ideas to make them think. On a reflection, I can see that I have utilised the more positive 'extrinsic' rewards to motivate students. I have asked students to do at least half of the weekly readings, and then to produce a 50-word summary of each. Some wrote this as a reflection on reading. Some routinely summarised them. Clearly, 'values accrue to a task for a variety of reasons: extrinsic, where the consequences bring something we want' (Biggs and Tang, 2011, p55). As mentors we have opportunities to nurture the intrinsic value to bring about positive results in areas such as (1). Improved reading habits; (2). Better quality discussions in tutorials; and (3). great attendance in tutorials. I have not utilised any disincentives for those who did not read the prescribed readings in time. I encouraged them to complete as and when they can.

Amongst my students there are Catholic, Christian, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and people that practice other faiths. Within the Australian Catholic University, there is another additional component called the core curriculum that is offered through two units of study aimed to assist integral human development and these units are offered to all students enrolled in the university. I had the pleasure of teaching these units as well. The curriculum in these units has expects the

students to work with empathy in their chosen professions. These core units expect to increase the listening skills of students. In social work and human services, empathy, and listening skills are considered crucial. I have drawn the following diagram to show how catholic social thought emerges in these two units of the core curriculum.



- every person be free from slavery, manipulation and exploitation
- we are one human family whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences
- everyone should have access to what they need to live a fulfilling life
- rights and responsibilities
- a collective responsibility to care for the world we inhabit.



The above subject matters are unique to Australian Catholic University that tasks the student in a meaningful and transformative way. The above core values are central to social work, alongside the upholding of dignity of humanity and global solidarity contained within the western social work paradigm. Respect for persons, social justice and professional integrity are also the key tenets of social work profession (AASW, 2010). Combined with critical theory (Leonardo, 2004) and aligned constructivism (Biggs, 1996) a responsible teaching approach would remind the students about the common good, including help for the poor and oppressed, and to work towards elimination of various forms of exploitation.

### **Reviewing the teaching of this Unit**

The unit on ‘working with culturally and linguistically diverse communities’ ensures that ‘the knowledge, understanding acceptance and sensitivity to cultural and human diversity is prerequisite for effective work with our clients’ (Chau, 1990, p-124). Such an approach in my view meets the partial requirements of the professional degree while the final test of acquisition of the students’ professionalism is determined through assessments at their field placements.

As a subject matter this is included in the second year when their field placement has not occurred and therefore there is limited room for an overarching constructive alignment to take place between knowledge and practice. By the same token it is also important to recognise that for a good praxis to occur the students equally require a fair degree of exposure to sociology, psychology and liberal arts as part of their second-year class load.

It is possible to redraw the inputs in this unit to include in the first three weeks of theoretical exposures, that are set to sequenced learning (Nulty, 2014), such as defining concepts such as diversity and culture and then introduce them to cultural responsiveness and move them into exploring one’s own identity. This corresponds to creating and offering opportunities to the students from the perspective of Vygotsky’s “ zone of proximal development proposition, that is by providing opportunities for the student (a) Learn on their own; (b) learn with help, guidance and scaffolding; (c) learn with and complete tasks with the peers. In addition to offering experiential learning



The next 9 weeks may be drawn into a workshop mode with the lecture components divide into two chunks of 25 minutes each, followed by a case study and students working through and silting out theoretical connections in matters such as

- theories of acculturation; trauma; oppression; discrimination
- cultural competence frameworks
- cross cultural skill development and assessment skills
- understanding and responding to racism.

Without sacrificing experiential learning about which I have referred to previously, (Kolbe, 1984), I would consider a three hours workshop in a room conducive for group with a teacher led case or scenarios and a vignette that portrays for example, an act of racism from simulated resources, videos or social media and newspaper reports, as a strategy in teaching. The small groups gain an understanding of the scenario and it opens many possibilities for them to address some of the following questions:

1. What form of racism is being experienced by the individual/community?
2. Identify two cultural theories which were taught/ or referred to previously and discuss the causes of this behaviour and attitudes, and the impacts of the racist behaviour on the individual/community, targeted.
3. As social workers they would be expected to describe their individual actions in addressing the racism and supporting the person/community that is targeted.

In the following weeks again, a range of vignettes may be brought into the class for individual group and community based intervention relating to people from the culturally and linguistically different communities that may continue to be disadvantaged due to structural and resource constraints in the systems and importance laid on the role of advocacy in social work in such contexts.

### **Conclusions**

In this personal account, I have utilised, Grounded theory, thematic reflections, and reflections over my teaching and with limited secondary data I have also applied a select review of literature from the field of educational methodologies to further my intent to draw a more constructively aligned cross cultural diversity curriculum that possibly evolves as we teach. The idea is to provide a template but not generate a restrictive curriculum. One major finding within this review for me as a mentor / teacher is to consider almost 60 percent time to be set for reflective exercises and



for building understanding through simulated case studies. In my teaching I realised that strengths perspective advantages (Pulla, 2017), social work educators as it sits closer to the resilience paradigm that is inherent. The strengths perspective credits the students with a sense of recognition of their own personal strengths and assets, it also provides the motivation to meet the goals. It appears to me that such as perspective will offer more room for creativity in the classroom learning environment to consider the complexities of culturally and linguistically diverse challenges in our society today. Such an approach has proved handy for me in raising the concerns of the migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and teaching about racism, prejudice and white privilege. The subject matters are intense and we do wish to generate a right attitude to approach culture and cultural differences. Equally, there are other areas that are of utmost importance such as the ethical issues and dilemmas in cross cultural practice, once again an opportunity for us to increase contents for self-awareness and reflection in our teaching.

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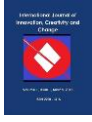
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