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Creating rainbows from words and transforming understandings: enhancing student learning through reflective writing in an Aboriginal music course

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Reflective journal writing is acknowledged as a powerful method for promoting student learning in higher education contexts. Numerous scholars highlight the benefits of reflective writing and journaling for students and teachers in a wide range of teaching areas. There is however, little discussion of how reflective writing is used in teaching and learning in Indigenous Australian studies. This paper explores how reflective writing can help students think critically about the complexities of researching and writing about Indigenous Australian performance. We discuss ways of incorporating and enhancing reflection in teaching and learning Indigenous Australian studies and examine how the use of reflective writing in Indigenous Australian studies can engage rather than educate; democratise rather than dictate knowledge; critically question and reflect upon rather than control and censor what we can know; and actively transform instead of passively inform.

Keywords: reflective writing; indigenous Australian studies; Aboriginal music performance; student learning

Introduction

The phone rings. I (Kate) can tell by caller ID that it's Liz. She's probably at the airport in Darwin on her way to Brisbane.
Kate: Hi Liz. How are you?
Liz: Okay. Just thinking about everything we need to do when I arrive. I guess when I get to Brisbane we better finish writing our paper for the teaching and learning conference. What should we try to emphasise about the value of reflective writing in teaching Indigenous Australian studies?
Kate: Well, it will be good to discuss how students have embraced reflective processes in our classroom and how this way of teaching, learning and thinking is useful, challenging, beneficial and inspiring for students.
Liz: Yes, I agree. And despite reflective writing being used in many Indigenous Australian studies classrooms across Australia, there has been little research on this.
Kate: That's true. Where should we begin?
Liz: Let's start by describing the Aboriginal music course we have been teaching together.

The research site is a course called ABTS2102 'Aboriginal Music: Performing Place, Power and Identity'. It is an embodied and experiential class grounded in...
ethnomusicological and anthropological frameworks. As such, it strongly focuses on fieldwork, observation and participation and most significantly includes many Indigenous Australian performers as guest lecturers to provide students with an opportunity to talk and think about Indigenous Australian performance. Students thereby enter into a personal and ‘live’ dialogue, and critical engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musics and performers. Liz began teaching this course when she joined the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at The University of Queensland as an associate lecturer in 1997. In 2006, Kate joined Liz as co-teacher of the course and they redesigned the course to be a three weekend intensive programme in association with a music festival. This further enhanced the experiential and embodied nature of the course as it provided students with a vibrant, exciting and valuable fieldwork experience where lecturers and students could watch performances by Indigenous performers, listen to Indigenous performers talk and participate in workshops where appropriate on specific topics. In 2006, the course was taught by Liz and Kate alongside Woodford Folk Festival and then in conjunction with the Dreaming Festival in 2007.

ABTS2102 begins with a weekend of lectures and tutorials that introduces the major concepts and ideas fundamental to Indigenous Australian performance practices. The following weekend, students and staff attend the festival. One week later the class meets again to debrief, discuss, reflect and come to an understanding of the performance of Indigenous Australian music and dance. By combining reflective journal writing, experiential learning, independent research and lectures, the course aims to raise students’ awareness of the diversity of Indigenous performance and encourage students to consider how Indigenous Australian performers simultaneously resist and use colonialist constructions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performance.

A reflective journal was introduced as a compulsory part of the course to give students a space to develop their ideas, to personally engage and reflect on their experiences at the festival; help them think about their positioning in relation to Indigenous Australian performers; work through difficult issues surrounding working in Indigenous studies, and consider their expectations and assumptions of Indigenous Australian performance. The experience led us to think more about how student learning about Indigenous Australian issues and musics can effectively be enhanced and promoted through reflective writing. We found that despite the broad range of literature highlighting the benefits of reflective journal writing and the widespread use of reflective writing in other Indigenous Australian studies courses, there is little research relating to how reflective writing enhances students’ learning about Indigenous Australian studies.

In this paper, we explore various ways of incorporating and enhancing reflection in teaching and learning Indigenous Australian studies and examine how reflection can assist students and teachers in exploring their assumptions, expectations and positionings in relation to Indigenous Australian music. Our discussion draws on reflective writings by students, focus group interviews and our own conversational reflections. Ultimately, we aim to be reflective both in content and intent to use ‘the page as a meeting place in which ideas can intermingle and, in developing, give rise to new ideas for new learning’ (Moon 2006, 17) and thereby
increase students’ understanding of the impact of colonialism on Indigenous Australian peoples and their music making today.

Learning through reflective journals

One form of reflective writing, the ‘journal’, is proposed by numerous scholars as being a tool for facilitating student learning in higher education (Clarke 2004; English and Gillen 2001; George 2002; Ling 2005; Moon 2006; Morrison 1996; Patton 2006). English and Gillen (2001, 1) pose the question ‘Why is journal writing such a powerful vehicle for fostering adult learning?’ They note that ‘the answer is simple: journal writing provides those occasions that can help one “to find out what’s in your heart and at the bottom of your mind”’ (Bender in English and Gillen 2001, 1). Moon (2006, 26) argues that journal writing is a process that enhances learning in a number of ways: by slowing down the pace of learning, increasing the sense of ownership in learning, acknowledging the role of emotion in learning, providing a learning experience that deals with situations that are not straightforward and enhancing learning through the process of writing (Barz 1997, 52).

Creme argues that journals effectively promote student learning because they call for ‘different ways of thinking [about] the subject from the traditional essay: more open ended, questioning and exploratory; raising rather than answering questions; enabling exploration of connections between ideas encountered in the course and the writer’s experience’ (2005, 289). O’Rourke agrees and suggests that ‘writing about new information or ideas enables students to better understand and remember them, and that articulating connections between new information or ideas and existing knowledge secure and extends learning’ (1998, 404). O’Rourke (1998, 404) also notes that the journal ‘can help students move from surface to deep learning both within and across modules’ and is ‘a powerful tool for developing student confidence and cognitive ability in ways which embed and extend learning in the core modules comprising their programmes of study’ (1998, 403).

While there are many different approaches to reflective journaling, Morrison (1996) and Greenwood (2002) both highlight that journal writing encourages an analytic approach and clarifies ideas, perceptions and attitudes. This brings into focus connections and meanings that would have otherwise remained hidden. Hartley (1998) and Clarke (2004) also found that the writing reflective journals helped students raise awareness and evaluate their own learning. Of particular relevance to ABTS2102 is that reflective journals are increasingly used as a means for accounting for and realising learning in fieldwork (Moon 2006, 59).

Ethnomusicology has long used journal writing, fieldnotes, observations and ethnographic writing techniques as tools for puzzling out, questioning and working towards an understanding of music cultures. Kisluik and Gross (2005) use reflective writing and journal entries to explore teaching, learning and performing BaAka (pygmy) music in a university context while Marsh (2005) discusses the use of fieldwork projects to encourage pre-service student teachers to take a more active and personal approach to teaching music cross-culturally. Similarly, Southcott (2003) outlines the inclusion of reflective journals in a European Perspective on Music Education course at Monash University. Taking the ABTS2102 students to the Dreaming Festival
provides students with a fieldwork experience and the writing of a reflective journal could be viewed as a form of fieldnote. Barz (1997, 45) writes that fieldnotes are ‘a site for personal reflection’ and ‘inscribe action while simultaneously affecting and reflecting on that action’. This is comparable to Schön’s (1983) discussion of reflection-in-action. Similarly, Kisluik also emphasises the value of writing fieldnotes as a tool for reflection which ‘creates a conversation within which learning is located’ (1997, 32).

Journaling is suited to ABTS2102 because the course involves talking about sensitive issues that many students find challenging and confronting including the history and violence of colonialism, the racism inherent within non-Indigenous imaginings of Indigenous Australian people and performance, the continued oppression of Indigenous people today, and students are required to consider their positioning in relation to this. This is, as hooks (1994, 154) describes, ‘difficult material’, which moves away from that ‘cozy, good feeling’ into the realms of awkward memory and knowing (McConaghy 2003, 11). Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students can find themselves ‘exploring, experiencing and processing emotions, memories, and other aspects of themselves that were previously unknown’ (Butterwick and Selman 2003, 14). Savin-Baden aptly comments that ‘learning is about engaging different dimensions of ourselves in the learning process. Emotions and feelings are often the ones that are most neglected in learning’ (2000, 55) and hooks also notes that the ‘restrictive, repressive classroom ritual insists that emotional responses have no place’ (1994, 155). Reflective journaling aims to provide an opportunity for students and lecturers to write about and discuss with each other the kinds of emotional and intellectual discomforts they are experiencing, and through this discursive exchange, create the possibility to replace old ways of knowing and being with something new (Boler 2004, 129).

**Reflective writing in Indigenous Australian studies**

Reflective writing is used in many Indigenous Australian studies classrooms in preference to other approaches. Reflective approaches strongly resonate with the autonomous, embodied and experiential nature of teaching and learning about Indigenous cultures. However, despite the possibilities for transformative teaching and learning, there has been limited research on the application of reflection in Indigenous Australian studies and there is very little study of the effectiveness of this approach in relation to Indigenous education globally.

When approached from a critical pedagogical perspective, Indigenous Australian studies necessarily addresses emotionally difficult topics related to race, history, the on-going power of colonialism and our identities as Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in relation to these. Reflective writing holds possibilities for opening up an engaged, dialogic, reflective and critical classroom to help students think about difficult issues, the traumatic history of colonialism, their identities and positioning. Framed in this way, the use of reflective writing in Indigenous Australian studies aims to engage rather than educate, democratise rather than dictate knowledge, critically question and reflect upon rather than control and censor what we can know and actively transform instead of passively inform.
Reflective activities in ABTS2102

Concerned by the issues raised in education literature regarding the assessment of reflective journals (Creme 2005; Moon 2006; O’Rourke 1998; Woodward 1998), we introduced the reflective journal as a compulsory aspect of the course, that is not formally assessed. Students were required to then draw on their reflective journals to write a reflective essay. A number of scholars outline this approach as a way of addressing the problem of assessing student writing that is exploratory (e.g. Creme 2005). Moon (2006) argues that another way of addressing the issue of assessing reflective writing is developing the assessment criteria with students because ‘learning can be achieved if learners themselves play a part in the process of developing assessment criteria’ (111). Therefore, during the first weekend of lectures and tutorials, we discussed the issues surrounding assessing reflective writing and asked students to ‘brainstorm’ criteria for assessing the reflective essay. A discussion followed and a list of preliminary criteria was developed. Cannon and Newble argue that, ‘one critical aspect of organisation is the “alignment” between the goals, the learning and teaching activities, and the assessment tasks that we set our students’ (2003, xvi; also see Biggs 1999; Laurillard 1993; Ramsden 2003). The assessment was closely aligned with one of the course objectives that related to reflection and critical analysis of the performance practices of Indigenous Australian performers.

Research demonstrates that students often need guidance with reflective writing (Bain 2002; Clarke 2004; Moon 2006; Morrison 1996). To assist students, we developed learning activities to facilitate and guide students’ reflection, which we used during the first weekend of the course. Kate first gave a mini-lecture on reflection and reflective writing. She began by asking students to write down what they understood by the terms ‘reflection’ and ‘reflective writing’ and we discussed their perceptions. Kate then introduced students to ideas and quotations from the education literature about the importance of reflective writing and journaling, how students can learn from reflective writing, examples of reflective writing from our own writing and myths and tips about reflective writing. The mini-lecture also included an activity adapted from Moon (2006) that asked students to read three different accounts of an incident and identify features that illustrate each account progressively changing to deeper levels of reflection.

We also developed other reflective writing learning activities to provide students with the opportunity to practice reflective writing during class. These reflective writing activities were then discussed together as a group and students were invited to share their reflections. These activities used were mostly adapted from suggestions and methods for working on journals and reflective writing exercises found in the educational literature and Figures 1 and 2 illustrate two examples of these.

One example was ‘day note’ where students were given pads of stick-on paper and asked to fill in a note on what they were doing or thinking about once every hour. This provided material to reflect on later in the day (Figure 1).

Students were also asked to listen to the George Rurrrambu version of ‘My Island Home’. As they listened to the song, they were asked to ‘doodle’ on a page (Figure 2). The following guiding questions were given to them to write about once the doodle task had been completed: What words come up as you look back over your ‘doodle’? What thoughts does this ‘doodle’ draw from within you?
I see coral, thoughts of movement of sand and the elements. Structure still is in the
doodle though the flowing elements surround the structure possibly representing home
(sea) representing your present place in the city. Even though we are in the city those
elements of home and country flow all around us, you can’t separate yourself from
country, part of it always comes with you, it surrounds you.

Figure 1. Example: student day notes.

Figure 2. Example: student ‘doodle’.
Evaluating changes in reflective teaching and learning processes

The use of reflective writing was evaluated using qualitative methods, drawing on data from multiple sources and data collection and analysis, which took place between May and September 2007. These are detailed in Table 1 and the three significant findings are explored below.

Findings 1: students’ assessments

Students’ reflective journals allowed space for students to: explore their own identities in relation to Indigenous Australian music, make connections to literature, rethink initial reflections and question their understandings of Indigenous Australian performance.

Relating to own identity

Students used their journals to explore their own identities in relation to Indigenous Australian performers and music making. One student questioned:

Is it my Western traits to think that because this is able to effect white perceptions that it should be utilised in a bigger way?

Another student made connections to her own life experiences:

I have a place that I consider like my country myself, and I wish I could sing and dance for it…but if I had songs for it I could keep it alive in my heart…Now after this reflective day I find other things to say. I know I will draw strange parallels with my own little life and my own little country!

This student also wrote in her journal in relation to her identity as a non-Indigenous person:

If I had been an Aboriginal person, I would have been very angry at white people. I feel ashamed to belong to this category of ‘non-Indigenous’. I will be white all my life, and to them look like a murderer.

Table 1. Evaluating changes in reflective teaching and learning processes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Key question</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Time of collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Students’ assessments</td>
<td>Did giving the students further guidance, exemplars and activities help current students move from descriptive writing to critical reflection?</td>
<td>Current students</td>
<td>July/August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Focus group</td>
<td>What are current students’ experiences and understandings of reflection and reflective writing?</td>
<td>Current students</td>
<td>Late August/early September (Conducted by colleague)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Teacher reflections</td>
<td>Has our learning about reflection been enhanced and what did we think worked and what could have been improved?</td>
<td>Lecturers: Liz Mackinlay and Kate Barney</td>
<td>May/June, August and November</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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This student also wrote in her journal in relation to her identity as a non-Indigenous person:

If I had been an Aboriginal person, I would have been very angry at white people. I feel ashamed to belong to this category of ‘non-Indigenous’. I will be white all my life, and to them look like a murderer.
Non-Indigenous students in ABTS2102 often speak and write about their feelings of shame and responsibility for Australia’s history of colonisation. Maddison (2009) notes that non-Indigenous people are often so paralysed by ‘white guilt’ that they are often unable to move beyond this paralysis. Reflective writing provides a space for students to articulate these feelings and write openly about their emotions and the messy politics of relations between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people in Australia.

Connections to discourse, rethinking initial reflections, challenging expectations

The journal also created a space for the students to challenge their expectations and assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, question their understandings of Indigenous performance and rethink their initial reflections. One student wrote:

Reflecting on the performance by Gurrumul Yunipingu I begin to think of the discourse between the audience and the performer.

Similarly, another student noted:

I remember how quick I was to draw parallels when [Indigenous performer] Christine Anu sung famous songs . . . is she making parallels between all black/Indigenous claims?
I read in the book Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places that is was popular in the post-colonial period to work on a general recognition between all Indigenous people.

Further she wrote:

All the questions raised do challenge my expectations and that makes everything more confusing. All what I believed has to be challenged.

Here the students used their journals to link their understandings with discourse about Indigenous performance and consider and reconsider their assumptions of Indigenous Australian performance.

Many students noted in their reflective essays that they felt that the reflective journal assisted them in moving towards deeper understanding of Indigenous performance. One student wrote:

The journal writing helped me to learn and realise many things. What we learn and how we learn it is at the centre of every study. It is especially relevant for a reflection on Aboriginal music.

She further noted:

I have reached the end of this course, not with persisting questions but with new and innovated questions: how could Indigenous music and performance aid community political movements and create balanced power relations in Australia?

This suggests that she is aware of her learning and how her understandings have changed through her experiences in ABTS2102. This is aligned with Moon’s description of the deepest level of reflective writing that consists of ‘the acquisition
of new information, the review of ideas and the effect of time passing’ (Moon 2006, 163).

**Findings 2: focus group discussion**

The phone rings. I (Liz) am guessing it will be Kate and she probably wants to chat about the focus group with our students from ABTS2102 this semester. I can feel a sense of anticipation as I reach for the phone, wondering what they have said about their experiences and understandings of reflection and reflective writing. Did they get the same sense of journey towards a deeper understanding as me? What are their ideas about performance, their knowledges of and experiences with Indigenous Australian peoples?

Liz: Hi Kate! Did you have the focus group? How did it go?
Kate: Hi Liz, yes, it went really well. From the transcript, I can see that students found reflective writing useful for exploring identity and positioning in relation to Indigenous music, and challenging their expectations and assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performers. I’m also really pleased that they are keen to use reflection as a learning tool in the future. Here are some comments from them about reflection:

**Student comment:** It’s a way of reflecting on yourself, reflecting on your position working with Indigenous Australians and with music. It’s a way of checking the protocols and reflecting and seeing and working out whether you have a right to be there, justifying or questioning yourself not just analysing the ‘Other’.

**Student comment:** The journal writing helped me to learn and realise many things. What we learn and how we learn it is at the centre of every study. It is especially relevant for a reflection on Aboriginal music.

Liz: That’s interesting. Some could criticise reflective writing as achieving little more than enabling the student to articulate their prejudices rather than gain new insights. Did the students comment on this?
Kate: Yes. The students noted that the process of reflective writing assisted them in exploring their prejudices and assumptions about Indigenous performance rather than confirming their prejudices. For example:

**Student comment:** Like if you had prejudice you will have to write them down and after that you realise this is wrong and you have to change it so it’s useful because you can see your direct response and it can be challenged.

**Student comment:** Yeah and it’s a good way of analysing our assumptions and readdressing them and going back and critically looking at ourselves. Being written, well like you have to write something so you can write everything and then… when it’s out of your head you can see it more clearly and with distance.

**Student comment:** By analysing yourself you do refocus and have a way of analysing basic protocols and issues surrounding Indigenous people, power of whites and attitudes because you get tied up and forget the attitudes that inform the issues.

Kate: The students also discussed how reflection has assisted them in considering their own identities as non-Indigenous students studying Indigenous Australian people and cultures. For example one student noted:

**Student comment:** I think it’s important to be put in those situations, draw attention to it and realise it’s really difficult to be a white person in Australia and not have these preconceptions because it’s such a part of what we’ve been fed our whole lives, our education and everything and it’s important to be put in those performance places and reflecting, it drew it out for me more, more than usual.

The students in the focus group highlighted the difficulties of being non-Indigenous students studying Indigenous Australian music and how the processes of reflective
writing helped them work through and analyse these issues. We discussed this further in our own reflections on the course.

Findings 3: our reflections

Liz: Well, that was some kind of course wasn’t it Kate? I feel quite overwhelmed, not only because of how much I enjoyed it as both teacher and learner, but because of the new and exciting places we went to in our learning about Indigenous Australian music and dance, the moments for reflection were a huge part of that I think.
Kate: I would have to agree. I didn’t expect to get so much pleasure from the act of writing and reflecting.

Liz: The process of discovering thoughts, feelings and ideas this enabled in relation to our learning was at once inspiring, surprising and challenging. Certainly, for me as a teacher, reflection provided a new way for me to approach the course content, what I wanted to talk about with students, and my own perspectives on the material. It was like putting on a different pair of glasses and seeing things anew with fresh eyes and mind.
Kate: Yes, it certainly provided me with a way to explore my emotions and feelings in relation to Indigenous performance and share those more openly with the students than I might of if we weren’t writing and reading out our reflections. I really like the ideas for activities in Jennifer Moon’s book and I liked how we adapted and moulded them to suit the context of Indigenous studies.

Liz: One of my favourite reflective activities was the doodle. To simply draw and respond to thoughts in images was fantastic for me. Taking the drawings further by considering their meanings into relation to the course was also very revealing, bringing to light understandings which may never have been uncovered. Since then I have been inspired to use drawing a lot more as a reflective tool. I am now looking forward to the process of looking back over the sketches I’ve made in relation to the course to see my own journey, questions and musings as a learner.
Kate: Reading through the reflective essays and journals, I think that reflective writing certainly helped students to consider and challenge their assumptions about Indigenous performance, see patterns and themes in their reflections and explore the complexities of their identities as non-Indigenous students studying Indigenous music. Certainly in their reflections there are elements of self-questioning, recognition of the role of emotion and recognition of prior experience and thoughts, and acknowledgement of learning through reflection.

Liz: It’s really interesting to go back and look at our and students’ reflective writing and consider the kinds of thought processes, ideas and learnings that come through as well as the fluidity and confidence that begins to grow as we find our voices. All of us wrote very nice and flowing descriptions of performances – this is the easy part. Everyone showed a movement away from pure description to thinking more deeply about what the description means for us. I’m not sure that we entered into the realm of critical reflection, certainly the questions we all asked of ourselves and the performances are bordering on critical depth but maybe we need to think more about how we could scaffold the reflective writing pieces to build up to critically reflective writing.
Kate: Yes, I agree perhaps for next time we could re-work the reflective activities so that they link together more and facilitate an even deeper level of critical reflection. Another issue we could explore further is how reflection might be used to further consider issues of identity in relation to Indigenous studies. I wonder are lecturers responsible for an ethics of care to help students make their way through these complexities of their identities and non-Indigenous and Indigenous race relations? It is a complex and at times difficult process to be a non-Indigenous person researching Indigenous Australian music and the students picked up on that and used their journals and reflective essays to explore their positioning and facilitate discussing, thinking deeply and sharing these experiences.
Conclusion

From our perspective, one of the reasons why reflective writing is so valuable is the open moment it provides for ‘relationship’: for teachers and learners to enter into an intimately personal dialogue about the complexities of Indigenous Australian issues. This is particularly important in the context of Indigenous Australian studies where non-Indigenous students and educators are increasingly asked by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to identity themselves in relation to Indigenous Australian peoples, to position and understand their white race power and privilege, and thereby work towards taking a part in the colonial story (Smith 1999, 3). Bird Rose (1997, 213) notes that academics working in Indigenous Australian studies have an obligation to an ‘ethics of care’ to ‘do what we can to effect some healing in this world’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. We also need to assist students to come to terms with the difficulties, discomforts and emotions experienced between non-Indigenous teachers and students and Indigenous performers in these cross-cultural contexts. The process of reflective writing makes space to give voice to things often known intuitively and allows teachers and learners in Indigenous Australian studies to ask the difficult, messy and uncomfortable questions about race relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, white race power and privilege and our own positioning in relation to colonial history. It is this dialogue with Self about the Other which ultimately links, as Fox asserts, awareness and acceptance of the colonial reality with ‘an agenda which does not accept the dichotomies implicit in the terms coloniser/colonised . . . but rather explores the relations of power through dialogue, creating spaces for transformation, for new educational and methodological strategies’ (Fox 2004, 91).

Next, we are undertaking a larger project exploring the role of reflection in the teaching and learning of Indigenous Australian studies and will continue to explore how reflective writing ‘can be compared to the formation of a beautiful rainbow . . . a rainbow is described as a set of coloured arcs seen against the sky, whereas the journal is a tapestry of events seen against a backdrop of human life’ (English and Gillen 2001) to provide personal, social and learning outcomes for students studying Indigenous Australian studies.

Acknowledgements

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