Learning Identities: Teaching (a) Migrant Nation

Sara Wills
The Australia Centre
University of Melbourne

What I have to offer this 'Teaching Across Cultures: Australian Studies in an International Context' conference is the outcome of developing and teaching the undergraduate subject Migrant Nation: Culture and Identity as part of the Australian Studies program at the University of Melbourne. In this brief paper I want to reflect on the experience of teaching Australian Studies largely to an Australian rather than an international audience, but one that needed to be considered diverse nonetheless. In particular, I want to outline some of the ways in which the course provoked self-reflexive learning, as well as a critique of the ways in which Australian Studies programmes operate.

Migrant Nation: Culture and Identity is an interdisciplinary course, cross-listed across cultural studies and politics departments, that focuses on Australia since the Second World War. It 2003 it attracted 83 students at second- and third-year level, and aimed to encourage students 'to engage critically with Australia as a migrant nation, identifying its complex nature through a variety of disciplinary perspectives'. By the end of the course students were supposed to be able to:

- comprehend and engage with a range of interdisciplinary approaches to Australia as a migrant nation, including historical, political, social and cultural texts and debates;
- demonstrate a critical understanding of the histories and politics of Australian immigration and multiculturalism;
- be able to think in theoretical terms about the concept of multiculturalism in an Australian context;
- and demonstrate a capacity for critical thinking about Australian culture and society.

In order to fulfil these criteria, the course covered:

- issues arising from inhabiting a nation founded on colonization, and thus what it might mean to call Australia a ‘migrant nation’;
- the framing of policies and the kinds of social, cultural and political histories that shaped the postwar migrant nation;
- debates about what kind of society and national identity has been envisioned during the postwar period, including the legacy and influence of Britishness;
- the economic imperatives behind postwar increases in immigration and the experience and impact of ‘migrant hands’ in the workplace and community;
- the settlement and un-settlement experience of migrants and of the ‘host’ society, including the implementation of multicultural policy;
- the public, institutional and cultural representation of migrants and the immigration experience (museums, festivals, ‘ethnic precincts’, etc);
- critiques of multiculturalism and the politics of ethnicity and identity;
- race and immigration debates, including so-called ‘ethnic tension’ issues;
- refugee issues and the boundaries of identity;
- issues of displacement and belonging, including a discussion of second and third generation ‘migrant’ culture, hybrid identities and senses of place;
- and an exploration of national identity and citizenship, by asking how we might re-shape our institutions to reflect a new political definition of Australia, and how we might change the idea of cultural Australianness so that it is something with which all can identify.

Of the 83 students who participated in the course, there were six international students and most were Australian-born or based. Probably about two-thirds of the Australian students, however, were either grandchildren of migrants who came to Australia in the immediate postwar period, or children of migrants who arrived since the 1970s and many of these were from a non-Anglo background. Classroom discussion during the course revealed that students understood the ways in which their world view, and view of Australia, was shaped by the fact that family members came from countries such as Greece, Italy, Malta, Poland, Germany, Turkey, Lebanon, the USA, UK, Croatia, Fiji, Indonesia, Japan and Viet Nam. And it was also a conscious part of my teaching to foreground my own position as an English migrant, and the particular kind of understandings of migration that might have given me, while at the same time consciously trying to include case studies of different migration experiences, other voices, and to encourage students to draw upon personal and family experiences. And many needed no encouragement to do this, and I’ll discuss some of the outcomes later.

So what I had, in some respects, was a transnational rather than an international context, and I found that this revealed and required the appreciation of a variety of learning identities on the part of both student and teacher. While unable to develop the repercussions of this at great length here, there are a
number of points that are valuable to highlight, although much of what I have to say is in some ways basic to all teaching. The first of these is that, certainly prior to teaching, it was almost impossible to develop a program that one could guarantee would fit the needs of everyone, because of the diversity of the student body. And this should be seen I think as a very basic point about the diverse cultural identity of the Australian classroom: that in some respects we are always teaching across difference and should always be drawing on pedagogical skills that give the ability to provide as many points of identification as possible by using different ‘texts’, examples, voices and ways into an issue. This highlights for me that the most important thing about teaching is gearing the content towards an intellectual and pedagogical outcome built into the course, not tacked on as ‘appropriate’ method. And in Migrant Nation this outcome was very much to do with the ability to think both broadly and critically about issues, to analyse power relationships, to see their application and relevance, and to make learning part of the process of social change itself. This was, of course, related to the politics I brought to the course; something we all do whether acknowledged or not, and about which I’ll be more explicit shortly.

Secondly, and as a result of this first point, I did see it as my task to make students aware of the ways in which my ‘cultural’ location as a teacher would influence my perception of power, learning and identity, and thus early on I provided a case study that made the English visible as migrants (rather than ‘settlers’), and thus relativised or (to use a word I don’t like so much) ‘ethnicised’ both my and the English experience. And this kind of off-centring was a tactic I used a lot to get students to question what was dispensed to them as knowledge and approach texts critically in light of their own and other experiences and concerns. While some obviously wanted or needed me to provide an authoritative voice, as well as a safe space and opportunity to speak (and of course with some issues this is necessary), the process of engaging in a critique of the politics of my own location as a teacher set an appropriate tone for the class, which could develop into collective self-criticism. Thus in one tutorial we had a particularly lively discussion about the way I ‘hosted’ the classroom and Australia hosted new migrants. In another, after showing a documentary on the arrival and impact of a group of Vietnamese teenagers at a traditionally Greek Melbourne soccer club, a good discussion ensued on the identity formation of ‘wogs’, on self-identification and how some groups patrolled the boundaries of their identity in inclusive or exclusive ways (and this could be done in a humorous way and included a passionate explication by one student of the ‘Greekness’ of his puff-jacket-waring suburban gang, including their Greek techno music, and the relation of all this to the forms of ‘Greekness’ recognised both in the mainstream media and by his parents’ and grandparents’ generation). The most important thing in such discussions was not so much ensuring that the issue was discussed ‘appropriately’ in terms of something presumed to be ‘cultural sensitivity’, but that the emphasis was on developing a dynamic that set intellectual challenges for the students; so that they knew they wouldn’t get away with throwaway lines, and that, some fun aside, the ultimate basis upon which they had to deal with issues was thoughtful and intellectual.

In relation to this issue of understanding the cultural locations of teacher and student, I think it’s also necessary to realise that while we seem to be reading ‘across cultures’ here as ‘across ethnicities’, we are also always teaching across political cultures, or within a political culture; and that this means that what you teach one year may be received very differently the next depending upon the political culture of the time. Thus teaching about refugee issues this year will be different to teaching about them next year, not just because the issues may have changed, but because the culture within which the students receive such information has changed, and they bring different concerns to the class. And again I think it’s necessary to focus on the intellectual and pedagogical outcomes, which in Migrant Nation this year was the ability to engage critically in debate about immigration, race and national identity, and in the current climate to analyse particularly debate about ‘outsiders’, in a way that forces students to be conversant with these issues and, even if they didn’t agree with my politics of developing greater empathy and space for the experience of migrants, then opposing that on intellectual grounds – in a thinking way – rather than in terms of current media debate. And indeed that was how I set up the first lecture – to look at the range of media comments on immigration, ethnicity, multiculturalism, and ask how we might start to make sense of it all. And then the students’ first written exercise was to characterise debate on multiculturalism over a particular period and in relation to a set group of newspaper articles in order to help them develop a stance on issues and frame an understanding of the concept and key ideas.

Alongside setting intellectual challenges, another foundation for understanding such issues in the classroom is the (maybe problematic) idea of a common humanity: to think first of immigration and the possession of cultural identity as a more general experience and then as a historically contingent process – in a way centring the self as a means of eventually off-centring it. Of course not all experiences of migrancy are the same, and the question of what is common can be problematic, but I think in an environment that is aware of complexities, that appreciates that such issues are highly contested and that allows tensions to exist, it can soon become apparent that excessive cultural sensitivity can also be problematic (and it can also be culturally patronising in that it attempts to preempt responses). Another reason for keeping an intellectual (and I would stress emotional) openness around such issues is that I wanted to develop a space where it would be appropriate for those with no particular connection to an ethnic group, for example, to present or do work in that area if they were prepared to really listen and learn. And it was also a way of taking heat off particular students, so that the one women wearing a hijab in a tutorial for example didn’t have to bear the full burden of representation over debates around Muslim identity, and this was generally successful and well received.
Which made me reflect that I needed to make sure Migrant Nation never became about teaching

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Australia as spectacle where difference ceases to threaten or to signify power relations, and that what goes on 'across cultures' in the classroom can't really be separated from what goes on 'across cultures' outside it.

After I'd written at the bottom of this student's very appreciative analysis of the work of Ouyang Yu that the essay had made me re-think the challenges of this poet to the concept of multiculturalism, I soon received an email reply that he and Ouyang Yu were 'very different people' and that he didn't want to be 'boxed in that "angry" migrant category at all', because it was 'another tailor-made category created by White Australians to "explain" the uncomfortable social phenomena that their migrants feel uncomfortable!' And he wanted to emphasise that 'the fact that we (Ouyang Yu or I or maybe even you) show dissent about Australian social inequalities, complacencies, injustices etc is our way of showing how much we've come to like Australia as much as we in some ways dislike it!'

I think that the success of any teaching is measured by the quality of the students' work that comes out of it. I think this student was not able to feel relaxed and comfortable in the cross-cultural teaching environment I created, but I do think that it was an honest environment that intellectually challenged and engaged him. Of course this wasn't the only kind of engagement that emerged from the course, and I'd like to finish by sharing another example of the kind of interactive, reflective work on cultural identity that I was pleased came out of the course. The research for this essay consisted largely of an interview process where the student interviewed three generations of women with Maltese heritage, including his wife, with questions directed towards how a Maltese identity in Australia is conceived, articulated and perceived. My favourite part of the essay was where he discussed the complexity of Maltese identity in Australia through a description of his wife's grandmother's gardening. The student wrote:

She grew up in a poor farming family near Rabat in Malta, and her sense of homeland is reinforced in Australia by her love of gardening and cultivating plants for food. This is common amongst her Maltese friends as well: she said all Maltese she knows are gardeners, and here we can see the group representation of Maltese identity in the simple and universal activity of gardening, one that is made Maltese, or understood as such by those who can understand the codes of this particular vernacular (like the presence of the bulbous, light green Maltese zucchini), but one that remains invisible to uninitiated outsiders. Perhaps here is a clue to the dilemma of Maltese identity – it can exist unproblematically alongside or within 'Australianness' due to its codified submersion in cultural ephemera, but by this very virtue it makes the public/visible representation of Maltese identity problematic and inarticulate.

At the end of the essay, the student reflected on the process of producing this essay as 'a process fraught with uncertainty due to the lack of solid and contemporaneously relevant social representations of Maltese identity in Australia, and also due to our particular postmodern milieu where identity is fluid and malleable and appropriation and relativity of identity is commensurate with everyday life.' With that, I felt, he'd nailed it, and demonstrated not only a critical understanding of the construction and representation of migrant identity, but had also provided a useful insight on the cultivation of Australian identities when teaching across cultures.