

# Decolonizing Human Rights Education: Critical Pedagogy Praxis in Higher Education

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*This article tackles specific issues that arise in teaching human rights in a Western academic institution. As critical human rights scholars, we are concerned with a pedagogy of human rights that gives respect to cultural diversity and the cross-cultural applicability of concepts and social issues in ways that are not antithetical to the purpose of human rights itself. In the Australian context where we are located both as human rights educators and immigrants, our approach depends on giving critical attention to questions of colonialism and its aftermath; to how contemporary human rights are understood across diverse cultures and subjectivities; and how to enable decolonizing methodologies to ensure an ethical exchange and negotiation of human rights learning and teaching in a higher education context. This approach is significant since contemporary Australia is an immigrant nation, a settler colonial society that is located in the South and yet problematically dominated by ontological and epistemological orientations towards the North. We argue that a critical pedagogy of human rights involves a robust non-colonizing and ethical engagement that is both self-reflexive and aware of complicit power relations. We seek to interrogate power as understood through the relationship between lived experience, knowledge and education. In our article we examine, through examples in our own teaching practice, how we seek to create and enable a critical pedagogical space that allows such an ethical engagement to take place.*

*Keywords: critical human rights education, critical pedagogy, decolonizing methodologies*

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching a critical human rights education to international and domestic students in an Australian university requires a range of theoretical, ethical and methodological considerations to take account of the complex power relations extant. Given the now prevalent international application of universal notions of human rights and their formation through local socio-cultural, legal and political contexts, the kind of international education that takes place in Australia – a colonial settler society – raises many issues for human rights educators whose practice is framed through critical pedagogy.

In this paper, we explore and discuss specific issues that we argue arise in our teaching human rights in a Western academic institution. As critical human rights scholars, we are concerned with a pedagogy of human rights that gives respect to cultural diversity and the cross-cultural applicability of concepts and social issues in ways that are not antithetical to the purpose of human rights itself. To arrive at such a position is not without its challenges and assumptions. We are acutely aware that our curriculum and teaching practices are embedded within hierarchical epistemic structures that are legacies of colonialist and European intellectual traditions.

The contemporary university in which we work is presently a complex educational space, one that has increasingly become characterized by corporate mission statements, intense instrumentalist driven (and consequently, narrow) research goals, and learning and teaching that is linked explicitly to vocational knowledge. We recognize that the university learning space that traditionally offered a ground for critical engagement with knowledge and the project of being human has become increasingly difficult to navigate in an age that has more interest in a knowledge economy, where critique is relegated to the margins and where participation, engagement and collaboration have become managed through highly corporatized models of exchange. As Henry Giroux (2007) puts it,

... the greatest challenge facing higher education centers on...reclaiming the academy as a democratic public space willing to confront the myriad global problems that produce needless human suffering, obscene forms of inequality, ongoing exploitation of marginalized groups, rapidly expanding masses of disposable human beings, increasing forms of social exclusion, and new forms of authoritarianism. (p. 203)

We are, like Giroux, alert to the university in which we work as a system of privilege and oppression, and one that is strongly and particularly informed by the ongoing effects of colonialism and cultural amnesia.

In the Australian context where we are located both as critical human rights educators and immigrants (Author 1 originally from Ethiopia, and Author 2 originally from Aotearoa/New Zealand) our approach to teaching and learning depends on giving critical attention to questions of colonialism and its aftermath; to how contemporary human rights are understood across diverse cultures and subjectivities; and how to enable decolonizing methodologies to ensure an ethical exchange and negotiation of human rights learning and teaching in a Western higher education context. Our approach is significant since contemporary Australia is an immigrant nation that is located in the South and yet problematically dominated by ontological and epistemological orientations towards the North. The so-called triumph of the European Enlightenment project is writ deep into the educational institutions of Australia. Accounting for this context, we argue that a critical pedagogy of human rights involves a robust non-colonizing and ethical engagement that is both self-reflexive and aware of complicit power relations. We seek to interrogate power as understood through the relationship between lived experience, knowledge and education.

In this paper we unpack the above considerations in the following way. First we provide an account of how the intellectual tradition of the Western academy has produced, within a global context, pervasive and implicit epistemic hierarchies. In Australia, the installation through British colonialism, and entrenched elevation and dominance of the Western intellectual tradition, has occurred at the expense of understanding and engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, and set a pattern in the

educational body politic of Australian tertiary institutions where non-Western ways of knowing are generally elided.

Within a critical human rights educational practice, this architecture of knowledge production and epistemic violence needs to be properly understood in order to introduce an open, democratic, participatory and respectful space for learning, where critical engagement with the concept and practice of human rights as a global language and set of ethical blueprints for co-existence can take place. Second, we examine what characterizes a critical human rights education and consider the importance of activating human rights to respond to the multiple, intersectional and complex questions of existence and relationship, sameness and difference. In this paper, we focus on two important elements of critical human rights education: its relationship with critical pedagogy and the importance of decolonial critique to how we teach human rights. In the third section, we introduce a methodology of critical human rights education and provide several examples from our teaching practice.

In this paper, we present pedagogical spaces for critical learning that are relevant to how international and domestic students can understand their lived experience. Within the environment of a Western university (noting its limitations, assumptions, epistemic violence), we strive to enable a space where students come to understand that their lived experience is the “stuff of culture, agency and self-production” (Giroux, 1997, p. 110). This is important in approaching human rights through comparative and contextual critique. For us, despite a range of challenges as discussed above, a critical human rights educational practice can be possible when universal human rights comes together with the life world of the student’s experience, understanding how there are global, comparative and contextual issues at the heart of the learning act itself. Knowledge is never neutral; no one culture has a lock on truth; there is no such thing as an innocent bystander. We hope to enable such insights as these.

### **CONTEXTUALIZING CRITICAL HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION**

Critical human rights education is the criticism of human rights discourse, which invents the human as an abstract entity endowed with political and economic rights. This invention of the human emerged from the tradition of western thought that presented rights as natural and objective attributes of the individual. The epistemological basis of this abstraction can be related to the rise of the mind or thinking as the source of knowledge. Rene Descartes’ formula made truth contingent to the individual mind: “I think, therefore, I am” (1998, p. 18). From this perspective, what constitutes one’s reality is not what the person experiences, touches, or feels *per se* but what he/she *thinks* about these and any other realities.

The elevation of thinking to truth emerged within a long-held belief and practice about education as an important ideal in society. Aristotle’s famous saying “all men by nature desire to know” is a classic example of the importance of rational thinking as a pursuit of truth. Yet, thinking about the world was not the only source of knowing truth, as other ways of knowing such as believing, living, praying, acting were equally important. However, as Akeel Bilgrami (2016) argues, Descartes’ thesis ignited a superstitious reverence towards the importance of the mind as the only source of truth. The culmination of this superstition led to the acceptance of the view that the teaching of the mind to know truth (*veritas*) was the ultimate purpose of education. Hirst (1965, p. 31) presented the

aim of classical liberal education as “freeing the mind to function according to its true nature, freeing reason from error and illusion and freeing man’s conduct from wrong.” One of the consequences of this belief was that truth about the self and the world can be discovered only through rational thinking which can be acquired through organized education (Illich, 1973). The creation of organized schooling and political and philosophical discourses based on this belief facilitated the emergence of institutionalized knowledge about the social and the natural world. Knowledge institutions such as universities, traditionally the domains of privileged western men, became producers of truth as scientific knowledge. Human rights emerged from this intellectual tradition that invented the human as a thinkable and manageable subject. By declaring the human as the bearer of juridical rights, political institutions invented the human as a referent to their function. Rights were not experienced and felt by human beings, but were *declared* to have been part of the human body by political authority.

This intellectual tradition has important implications in how we imagine human rights as universal rights. By abstracting the human as an idealized entity without history, class, race, gender, sexuality, culture or experience, the defence of bare humanity created the possibility of exercising political power without limitation. Once the meaning of the human was stripped of its diverse religious, cultural, mythological and historical meanings, it became possible to declare rights from above as universal and inalienable. By delegitimizing the ways in which diverse traditions experience, create, improve and express the meaning of being human, by rendering the very sources and processes of meaning making meaningless, the institutionalized politico-juridical discourse of human rights in the west invented itself as a teleology of universal progress towards justice and emancipation.

Despite the claim of universality, human rights from their inception were fraught with internal contradiction and epistemic violence. Since the late eighteenth century, despite the acceptance of equality and liberty as important ideals, various forms of violations were the norm rather than the exception. For example, the equality of all men and their inalienable rights to life and liberty, although affirmed in the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1789, did not apply to blacks, indigenous people, slaves, women and persons who did not own property (Hunt, 2007). The adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 and the advent of the Age of Rights that followed the ratification of several human rights conventions and treaties, did not halt the rise of ubiquitous violence since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Violence against civilians, forced migration, environmental crisis and increasing inequality continues to affect millions of peoples. Given the constant abuse of human rights, Winin Pereira argued that human rights are “inhuman” as they are “designed and crafted to enable the west to profit from them” (1977, p. 3). Human rights portray ideals of universality, equality, rationality and individuality upon a social world that has historically, culturally, politically and economically been structured by racist, sexist, patriarchal, and capitalist hierarchies. Richard Falk (2000) considers the presentation of human rights universalism in societies where racism is internalized as false universalism. Similarly, the installation of human rights as the universal juridical gold standard in settler colonial societies such as Australia has happened concomitantly with the production of collective institutional amnesia about the epistemic violence of colonization and its aftermath in the everyday (see Offord et al., 2015). The discord between the ideals of human rights and the reality of human life they represent becomes mystified when the focus of education about human rights is on abstract conceptions and

rules rather than historical and lived reality of ordinary persons across diverse geographies.

The second problem is epistemic violence, the legitimation of overt and covert intellectual practices that cause the slow and unprecedented destruction of the knowledge systems of the non-western world. Boaventura de Sousa Santos refers to this as “epistemicide”, the other form of colonial genocide (2007). It often occurs in cases such as what Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) analyses describes as “linguistic genocide”, where a foreign western language is privileged and used as the medium of instruction in education, rather than the students’ mother tongue. This privileging of western language and ideas extends to academia, as demonstrated by Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (2005) powerful critique of mainstream research, which shows how it results in the silencing and violating of indigenous peoples’ perspectives and knowledges. Although human rights are not directly responsible for epistemicide, the intellectual tradition of western thought that produced them did not consider non-western knowledges and languages as having valid and equally important contributions to the canon of human rights. Liberal thinkers like John Locke (1976) and John Stuart Mill (1999) justified the dispossession and oppression of non-western people whom they viewed as primitive and barbaric. Consequently, although universal, human rights were regarded as inapplicable to them (Parekh, 1995). According to Mill, “despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end” (1999, p. 52). In fact, the UN Charter and the UDHR became sources of “universal” human rights while several countries were still under European colonial domination. Through emphasizing the theory of individualism, human rights undermined the collective basis of rights which are prevalent in Southern societies. They also undermined the knowledges and interests of the commons, indigenous, subaltern and ethnic traditions within the west (Merchant, 1980; Dussel, 2002). In this regard, human rights contributed to the project of western modernity that colonizes the minds and bodies of diverse societies by presenting itself as a means of liberation. As Ashis Nandy has noted, this aspect of colonialism “helps generalise the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The west is now everywhere, within the west and outside; in structures and in minds” (1983, p. 11). The failure of human rights to respond to the exclusion of diverse ways of knowing and living constitute the basis for critical engagement with human rights education. This involves opening and creating pedagogical spaces for learning from perspectives and experiences (comparatively and contextually) that are not explicitly articulated in terms of human rights.

## **ELEMENTS OF CRITICAL HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION**

Critical human rights education considers the importance of activating human rights to respond to the multiple, intersectional and complex questions of existence and relationship, sameness and difference (Offord, 2006). In this paper, we focus on two important elements of critical human rights education: its relationship with critical pedagogy and the importance of decolonial critique to how we teach human rights.

From a critical pedagogical standpoint, human rights education can be approached as a subject of critical dialogue between subjects who dialogue with one another “to reflect

on their reality as they make and remake it” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 13). This approach seeks to overcome the banking model of education whereby human rights is presented as a finished product that accurately represents concrete reality in the world (Freire, 1970). As Paulo Freire noted, in the banking model of education, students do not participate in the production of knowledge based on their experiences. Rather, they are consumers of pre-existing knowledges that were produced by others. Critical human rights education poses this model of learning as a problem they should overcome through dialogue with participants who bring their concrete experiences to the class room. By facilitating learning as a process of overcoming the internalized rejection of their own right to participate in education, critical human rights education becomes a social act that aims at liberation (Freire, 1970). This dialogical practice facilitates the application of critical thought on the dominant discourse of human rights.

Critical human rights education allows participants to understand the ways in which human rights have been used as the languages of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses of our time. In relation to hegemonic discourses in the era of globalization, Santos (2009) refers to how powerful actors and institutions utilize the language of rights to legitimize their authority, and hide social injustice and structural violence. Hegemonic globalization is driven by international financial organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and even corporations who utilize the language of human rights and development in justifying their financial and economic transactions with nation states. When working as a counter-hegemonic discourse, human rights are used to mobilize social movements to fight for the protection of the rights of the poor and vulnerable groups, minorities, and to halt the destruction of the environment (Escobar, 2004). For example, the Zapatistas movement in Latin America is a good example of how a grassroots indigenous peoples’ movement can offer an emancipatory hope for the oppressed in the era of globalization (Stahler-Sholk, 2001). Counter-hegemonic principles in human rights, when informed by critical theory, aim at challenging the multiple ways through which hegemonic human rights are used to silence and objectify the powerless. From this perspective, the teaching of critical human rights education focuses on the paradoxical ways in which human rights could be used as the language of institutional power on the one hand and the language of suffering and resistance on the other. Activating human rights using critical pedagogy entails the principled exposure of their violation by the hegemonic discourses of power, and their reclaiming by those whose agency has been denied.

The added element of decolonizing human rights opens epistemic spaces for silenced subaltern knowledges. Decolonial thinkers consider that western modernity has a darker side that hides the experiences of non-western people including slaves, women, minorities and indigenous peoples (Quijano, 2007; Dussel, 2009; Mignolo, 2011). The decolonial approach draws from the experiences of populations that have historically been dominated by what Aníbal Quijano (2007) called “the colonial matrix of power”. Such a matrix of power, which is also referred to as the coloniality of power, involves the domination of Southern peoples since the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. As the criticism of coloniality goes beyond the postcolonial criticism of political, cultural and economic domination of the South by the North, the distinction between colonialism and coloniality is critically important.

Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of

colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of people, in aspiration of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243)

Ramón Grosfoguel (2011) emphasizes the creation of “multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies (“heterarchies”) of sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic and racial forms of domination and exploitation where the racial/ethnic hierarchy of the European/non-European divide transversally reconfigures all of the other global power structures”. What coloniality emphasizes is not just the violation of human rights based on gender, class and race but also how people of similar racial, ethnic and gender identities are differently affected by the experiences of domination. For example, it asks how racial hierarchy creates difference between the experience of European and non-European women, how western education creates difference between the experiences of educated and uneducated African men, how the criticism of an indigenous African philosopher over Enlightenment thought differs from the criticism of a postmodernist philosopher in a western university, and so on. Due to the diversity of perspectives and the difficulty of creating distinction between the oppressor and the oppressed based on common social attributes, the decolonial approach emphasizes the *locus of enunciation*, on the epistemic, geographical or social location of the speaking subject (Grosfoguel, 2011). It emphasizes the importance of learning from the epistemic location of the South (Connell, 2007). The above perspective asks us how to open a pedagogical space for excluded voices and marginalized experiences when we teach and learn about human rights.

### **THE METHODOLOGY OF CRITICAL HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION**

The process of decolonising modern settler societies is a new phenomenon; we have no models from the past to guide us. ... If it happens at all, it will unfold in real time, and will be shaped by the Indigenous, ‘old’ settler, and recent migrant peoples who share the here and the now of our homelands. (Deborah Bird Rose, 2004, p. 24)

The above quote provides an important direction towards the methodology of critical human rights education by emphasizing the lived experiences of people in multiple contexts. We approach critical human rights education through the creation of three interrelated pedagogical spaces for critical learning. These are (1) *politico-juridical learning* that aims to challenge the hegemonic discourse of human rights as the language of institutions and power relations (e.g. the juridical enactment of human rights instruments to achieve meaningful outcomes for societies that are administered under legislative systems), (2) *critical praxis* that aims to activate the emancipatory spirit of counter-hegemonic discourses by rearticulating human rights as languages of social inclusion, social movements, the oppressed, the violated and those who are suffering, and (3) *decolonial dialogue* that aims to open the epistemic cannon of human rights to alternative conceptions of the good life, to experiences that have been excluded from human rights discourse due to the coloniality of power. This involves questions of cognitive justice, indigenous worldviews, knowledge democracy, pliversality, transmodernity, and so on. In this section we explore this tri-methodological viewpoint and draw from our teaching practice to show how human rights education could become an important critical and decolonial praxis of our time.

### Politico-Juridical practice

In contexts where legal instruments play an indispensable role in social and political life, human rights could be activated to hold power to account. The politico-juridical learning of human rights relates to the need to play an active role for the enforcement of existing human rights laws in contexts where human rights are used as the language of progressive politics. This approach recognizes the importance of providing legal support to victims of human rights violations within the existing human rights framework while recognizing the limits of such a remedy. Here, the pedagogical emphasis is on how best human rights instruments and institutions could operate to activate progressive politics; how legislative and administrative mechanisms do not violate important principles such as non-discrimination, rule of law and environmental rights; and how civic and political rights enhance accountability, transparency and participation.

This aspect of learning about human rights draws our attention to the juridico-political world of human rights. We focus on stories, ‘facts’, laws, procedures and institutions that are involved in a human rights situation. What happened, where, why, by whom and how are all questions that could enable students to frame human rights scenarios, to identify claim holders and duty bearers, and distinguish legal and political processes that may be relevant to address specific human rights issues. In this approach, we study how legal and political issues affect the rights of individuals and communities and what possible actions may be taken to expose violations and initiate political responses. Once students articulate local injustices, they proceed to relate those injustices with corresponding rights that are protected under the current human rights system from local to international levels. A typical example of this approach is our unit on *Human Rights Instruments and Institutions*. The topics in the unit focus on enabling students to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the international human rights system, and the major human rights treaties, bodies and complaint mechanisms. Although the existing international human rights system is a broken and weak system, it has important grammar and relevance in bringing the voice of suffering to the surface. In this regard, our emphasis is on providing students with practical skills and experiences that would allow them to work with human rights institutions at local and international levels. For example, we facilitate group and practical learning through simulations whereby students participate in a roleplay exercise as members of a human rights body or institution. They may act as a delegate of a national human rights institution, a human rights NGO or a government body, depending on the topic of the simulation. They identify specific issues that affect people’s lives, apply relevant human rights instruments in writing their report to the relevant human rights body, and present their report in a simulated hearing that involves invited guests and lecturers. The process demystifies the international human rights system by giving students a simulated role to act on real cases. As one student commented, the “simulation exercise [was] very useful for reinforcing the process and enabling students to position themselves in a selected role (NGO, AHRC, Government). The continuous emphasis on critical thinking [was] essential (HRIG5002, 2017, p. 6).

Although we recognize that most human rights courses focus on this juridical aspect of human rights, our approach differs in recognizing not just the limitation of this approach but also the importance of supplementary as well as alternative approaches. The lack of human rights enforcement mechanisms and the prevalence of the violation of human rights by states that are officially signed up to observe them is strong enough to move us beyond studying the juridical content of rights. Moreover, mere emphasis on the legal

approach leads to a positivist thinking that presents the social world as synonymous with the natural world. It encourages the belief that the existing capitalist system is natural, inevitable and eternal. Our pedagogical focus problematizes the dominant discourse of human rights as a topic of critical reflection as we cultivate the needed awareness of its working mechanisms.

### **Critical praxis**

The limitation of the juridical approach to human rights leads us to the second pedagogical space, which is teaching human rights as a counter hegemonic discourse that problematizes and challenges the discourse of neoliberal globalization. In this approach, human rights education emphasizes the bottom up or grassroots approach to globalization, as advocated by many social movements, critical scholars and activists. For example, such anti-globalization social movements not only challenge the logic of neoliberal globalization but also provide alternative conceptions of nature, society, rights, future and so on (Escobar, 2004). The counter hegemonic approach does not consider human rights treaties and conventions as sufficient mechanisms for human dignity. It considers the importance of activating human rights engagement to respond to issues that arise from multiple and complex contexts. This includes for example “a response to the denial of community and identity, where survival has become imminent due to perceived or actual processes of exclusion” (Offord, 2006, p. 17). The counter hegemonic approach focuses on the struggle of minorities, excluded groups and identities, aiming at activism and local empowerment. It draws from critical theoretical insights from anthropology, cultural studies, and critical theory.

In our practice, this aspect of learning draws us to the historical and social construction of the discourse of human rights. It presents classroom encounters as dialogical moments whereby participants learn the ways in which their position and their relationship to the topic influences their meanings towards human rights. It identifies the shortcomings and implications of the legal and political approach to addressing human rights issues, and cultivates the role of an *activist scholar* that works with those without rights (Fleay & Briskman, 2011). In our Masters of Human Rights Education course, students participate in classes on critical consciousness raising, activism, advocacy and social change. These topics introduce students to a variety of critical theories, and the historical struggle of social movements and community groups. It also supports them to participate in local advocacy networks and activist initiatives in their areas.

The approach allows students to evaluate the process of their learning in various ways. For example, through the anonymous eValue survey, a student commented that “the most personally helpful aspect of the course was that it gave me great permission to speak, write and express my own truths. It gave permission to value curiosity, lived-experience and the possibility of new truths to emerge” (HRIG5014, 2017, p. 6).

The Centre for Human Rights Education facilitates important opportunities for students to practically engage with contemporary human rights issues, especially on the rights of refugees and asylum seekers (see for example Fleay, 2017; Fleay & Hartley, 2016). The Centre’s strong legacy and experience in working with asylum seekers and refugees is an important source of teaching, research and activism that considerably deepens a comparative and contextual critique of human rights. Our students learn through praxis, action and reflection, for example by partnering with and acting through human rights advocacy groups while writing their final projects. The learning outcome of this process

was expressed by a student as “we were always encouraged to think critically and also relate the subject to experience. I think this helped me understand and ground some of the theories” (HRIG5001, 2017, p. 6)

### **Decolonial dialogue**

The third approach considers the importance of learning alternative epistemological traditions and narratives that are relevant to the question of being human. The decolonial approach is informed by the critical importance of responding to the living legacy of colonialism. In Australia, this has a particular relevance given the institutional and historical marginalization of the experiences and knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Peoples, and other minorities. We concur with Nandy’s observation that “Australian political culture is primarily a product of its tendency to see itself as a colonial power – a subaltern colonial power, but a colonial power nevertheless – when it has been actually a colonised society” (qtd. in Offord et al., 2015, p. xiii). The most enduring consequence of colonialism is epistemic violence and the invalidation of indigenous and non-western ways of knowing and becoming: “When people are stripped of their agency over their way of life, and manufactured as beings without history, knowledge and identity, they become disposable beings whose death and suffering become less outrageous to the dominant society” (Woldeyes, 2017, p. 29).

Our approach to decolonial learning involves the practice of dialogue from encounters with diverse epistemological traditions. Students learn about social reality and meaning making from diverse traditional, religious and cultural perspectives, from those with original voice. In one of our units, *Human Rights Across Cultures and Religions*, students encounter diverse epistemological, metaphysical, axiological and ontological concepts. We invite guest teachers, including non-academics, from diverse religious and cultural background including indigenous knowledges, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Asian/African traditions. The classes are dialogically oriented to allowing students to ask questions and conduct post lecture debriefings and reflections, to compare and contextualize their educational encounters. These pedagogical moments open opportunities to learn from difference, from the position of the Other as Other, to affirm the existence of Others without claiming to represent them or essentializing them. The methodology poses questions such as: How does human rights host the existence of religious perspectives, traditional beliefs, and knowledges outside the discourse of modernity and science? How can we understand the views of societies who ascribe rights to non-human persons, who consider existence as a set of relationships with generations that are past, present and emerging? Our approach uncovers the complexities, contradictions, encounters and possibilities that exist behind social reality, identity, belonging and human rights (Offord, 2008).

### **CONCLUSION**

A critical decolonial approach to human rights education, as presented in the three pedagogical spaces reflected above, addresses the challenge of not just how we teach human rights but more importantly how we as educators learn about human rights. These may include learning human rights as a process of activating the politico-juridical order to respond to the requirement of justice and the voices of violated subjects, as a language

of articulating the demands of social change and transformation, and finally as a dialogical space for multiple experiences and alternative perspectives.

In this paper we have tackled specific issues that arise in teaching human rights in an Australian academic institution. As critical human rights scholars, we argue that a pedagogy of human rights that gives respect to cultural diversity and the cross-cultural applicability of concepts and social issues in ways that are not antithetical to the purpose of human rights itself, require substantive comparative and contextual understanding. In the Australian context, our approach depends on giving critical attention to questions of colonialism and its aftermath; to how contemporary human rights are understood across diverse cultures and subjectivities; and how to enable decolonizing methodologies to ensure an ethical exchange and negotiation of human rights learning and teaching in a higher education context.

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