

Changing Times, Shifting Contexts: Variations on cultural politics and ‘the turn to culture’

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Abstract

Members of the Cultural Studies Working Group at Massey University pioneered the development of cultural studies in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the early 1980s. In 2002 the University of Canterbury will offer the first undergraduate degree in Cultural Studies in this country. Roy Shuker's social history of the cultural studies journal *Sites* is springboard for reflection on this new initiative and develops his argument that the project of cultural studies shifts across time and is shaped by different institutional contexts. It concludes with attention to the politics of pursuing interdisciplinarity in the context of management interests in ‘disciplining’ academics by disrupting ‘departmentalized’ academic institutions.

Roy Shuker's history of *Sites* provides a lively set of insights into the ways in which the project of 'cultural studies' has been taken up in Aotearoa/New Zealand. A core issue for Shuker is how cultural theory and the project of cultural studies are modified over time and across national and institutional contexts. I read Shuker's analysis on the evolution of *Sites* through the lens of my own recent involvement in the development of an undergraduate programme in cultural studies at the University of Canterbury. This programme, for which Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP) approval has just been obtained, builds on the initiatives documented by Roy Shuker. It is also shaped by intensifying challenges to disciplinary boundaries in the humanities and social sciences, challenges that were often advocated by the founders of *Sites*. This brief paper uses Shuker's social history of *Sites* as a springboard for looking at the more contemporary development of cultural studies at the University of Canterbury. (1)

Shuker maps the way in which *Sites* developed into a key vehicle for publication of New Zealand focused critical cultural and political analysis. The group that came together at Massey in the early 1980s was drawn primarily from the well-established disciples of Sociology, Education, English, Social Anthropology and History. Their conversations were sparked by a keen sense that critical work on cultural production demanded cross-disciplinary connections. In contrast, over half of those who joined the University of Canterbury Working Party on Cultural Studies in late 1999 represented departments that were already interdisciplinary in orientation: American Studies, Gender Studies, Theatre and Film Studies, and Mass Communication. Those in the more traditional disciplinary fields of English, Art History and Sociology were in the minority. Work pressures in the Maori Department meant that it was not represented on the working party, although discussion with members of the department occurred at different stages of the planning process.

In the early 1980s members of the Massey cultural studies group were significantly influenced by the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and *Sites* was defined as 'a journal for radical perspectives on culture'. Twenty years later, the Canterbury working party had a less coherent commitment to a particular strand of cultural studies and less overt identification with the designation 'radical'. However, like the Massey group of the 1980s, the working party had a mix of intellectual backgrounds, theoretical engagements and methodological expertise. Aware of the need to celebrate these differences and resist codification, but also under some pressure to 'define' cultural studies, the Canterbury working party, like the Massey group two decades before, crafted a statement about 'culture' as a field for political analysis, and attempted to list the types of intellectual work encompassed by the phrase 'cultural studies'. The final version of this statement locates cultural studies "outside the reigning orthodoxies and the still dominant disciplinary traditions in the humanities and social sciences". Echoing the concerns of the Massey group in the early 1980s, the Canterbury working party also identified cultural studies as "committed to the politicisation of knowledge producing practices" (University of Canterbury Working Party on Cultural Studies).

The eclectic body of intellectual work referred to as 'cultural studies' was identified as including empirical work, but also critical of empiricism and traditional historiography. Feminism and gender studies, queer theory, critical and feminist science studies and work on the politics of disabilities jostled with social semiotics,

Marxist cultural theory, post- and anti-colonialism, the new cultural history, critical ethnography, and cultural geography in the list of potential components of the Canterbury cultural studies programme. Shuker identifies feminism, feminist politics and sexualities as a major theme in issues of *Sites* over the last two decades. This is also a strong, but certainly not exclusive, focus in the Canterbury cultural studies programme that includes most of the current courses in Gender Studies as well as courses in History, American Studies, Theatre and Film Studies, Sociology, English, Geography, Anthropology, Russian that incorporate feminist analysis. The cultural studies working party were keenly aware of the way in which contemporary cultural studies draws on developments in gender, ethnic and sexuality studies over the last twenty years.

Just as 'the Massey group' were sometimes identified as potentially constructing a problematic cultural studies 'orthodoxy', so too were those in the Canterbury working party. Members of the larger Arts Faculty reference group, who met periodically with the working party, provided critical feedback on the draft statement on cultural studies and the fields of inquiry it encompassed. Members of the working party were identified as too US focused by specialists in European literature and culture, while New Zealand scholars thought there was insufficient attention to the specifics of this context. These critiques of output from the working group suggest a lively engagement with the context specific aspects of cultural studies and the impossibility of any group 'owning' the programme.

The Massey focused cultural studies group that spawned *Sites* was very convinced about the need to attend to the political economy of cultural production. Shuker quotes Steve Maharey's statement in 1981 on the significance of attention to both 'modes of production' and 'modes of signification'. Those developing a cultural studies programme at University of Canterbury have probably been more focused on 'modes of signification' than the Massey cultural studies group in the 1980s. This is partly an outcome of shifts in the politics of cultural studies in the last twenty years, and partly a product of the interests of those who have been involved in the working group.

The working party at Canterbury developed an undergraduate programme against the background of the increasing legitimacy of poststructuralist academic work over the last twenty years. The text chosen for the core third year course is the second edition of Simon During's *The Cultural Studies Reader*. Compiled within an Australian academic context, it incorporates core texts from scholars associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, but also draws on a range of European, United States, feminist and postcolonial scholarship. Simon During commented on the first draft of the Canterbury cultural studies proposal and has been an ongoing source of advice. This reflects the extent to which Australia as much as the United Kingdom or the USA is a source of inspiration for contemporary cultural studies in Aotearoa. During's cross-disciplinary collection is aimed at an international audience and encompasses both textual analysis and attention to the political economy of cultural production – both 'signification' and 'production'. It will be complemented by a set of cultural studies texts produced in Aotearoa/New Zealand, including articles that have appeared over the last twenty years in *Sites*.

The Massey cultural studies group and the set of people who founded and sustained *Sites* were pioneers. The Canterbury working party on cultural studies works as

consolidators rather than front line workers in the field of cultural studies. From the start, the Canterbury working party did not see itself as instituting a new set of courses with a cultural studies label, but facilitating connections between existing courses spread over a number of different departments and disciplinary fields. The challenge was to look at how components of diverse disciplines or interdisciplinary departments might be combined to produce a major in Cultural Studies that was not a substitute or “master signifier” for degrees in the humanities and social sciences (Striphas, 1998: 464).

An examination of courses offered in fields as diverse as German, Film Studies, Geography and Sociology, indicated a cluster of offerings that explored the politics of place, space and technologies, particularly the cultural politics of cities. Similarly, a range of courses examined the politics of gender, sexualities, race, migration, ethnicity and representations of resistant identities. A cluster of courses that addressed the politics of cultural interaction was apparent as well as an array of courses in the field of film, media, sport, leisure and popular culture. The latter has been enhanced by the recent development of a Mass Communications programme.

Significantly, the development of a cultural studies undergraduate programme did not require the rapid acquisition of new journals and books. Cultural studies journals have found their way into the library as ‘old’ disciplines and new cross-disciplinary programmes have found them imperative for their teaching and research. A report from the library confirmed that holdings are strong because of the activity of departments such as American Studies, English, Sociology and Feminist Studies over the last decade. The development of Theatre and Film Studies has also had a major impact on relevant library holdings. The development of the Anthropology programme has also contributed to an improvement in library resources. Holdings in this field will enhance students’ access to books and journals on culture as social process and the materiality of cultural production. The development of cultural studies in the last 20 years is also marked by an expansion in the number of websites with a cultural studies focus. (2)

Within the faculty there was some disquiet that a programme in cultural studies could undermine student enrolment in existing programmes at a time of static or declining numbers in the humanities and social sciences, both locally and nationally. The working party argued that the programme would build on existing courses rather than setting up a competing set of courses labelled ‘cultural studies’. The final version of the programme introduces just one new course, a third year core course that is compulsory for all those majoring in this programme. CULT301: Cultural Studies - Theories and Practices includes a research segment on cultural production that will involve students working in teams to investigate particular sites of cultural production. It is envisaged that skateboard facilities, web design businesses, kohanga reo, hairdressing salons, sports bars, working men’s clubs, martial arts schools, tattoo shops, video parlours, museums and art galleries will be potential sites for this work. The aim is to ensure that students attend to the economics and social relations of cultural production as well as textual analysis.

Those involved in developing this new programme have been acutely aware that there are deep contradictions involved in setting up an undergraduate degree in cultural studies. A cultural studies programme may resist disciplinarity, but it also potentially

mimics the disciplines in order to create legitimacy. An attempt was made to embrace openness within the cultural studies undergraduate programme and minimise rigidity with respect to how students might move through courses in this field. For this reason the programme does not start with a base, or foundational, first year Cultural Studies course, but instead encourages interaction between students coming out of different facets of the programme at the third year level. Some commentators have seen this as a weakness of the programme.

Why has Canterbury, one of the most conservative of New Zealand's universities, mounted the first cultural studies programme in this country? Why has the proposal not met with more resistance? Part of the explanation for this rests in the pursuit of incorporation as a core strategy. The number of existing courses that could be identified as suitable for the programme is indicative of the ways in which cultural studies has had an impact on Geography, Sociology, English, German and History during the last twenty years. Within almost every department in the Arts Faculty there are individuals who teach, write and research in ways that are inflected by this set of intellectual and political challenges to the humanities and social sciences. The impact of feminist scholarship, even in an institution as conservative as University of Canterbury, means that there are now a range of courses across departments that engage with feminist political analysis. Postcolonial critiques have also had a significant impact on the way in which Art History, Gender Studies and New Zealand History are taught. Consequently there is an array of exciting and relevant courses that students will be able to combine in different ways to construct degrees with a focus on cultural studies.

These courses vary in the extent to which they engage with what During (1999: 24) has referred to as “engaged cultural studies” as opposed to “the turn to culture”. During distinguishes an increasing focus on ‘culture’ and issues of representation from analyses “with an openness to the culture’s reception and production in everyday life, or more generally its impact on life trajectories” (During, 1999: 25). The aim of “engaged cultural studies” is to produce analyses of culture that “listen to far-off and marginalised voices.” For During, this project involves constantly challenging the boundaries in which it is located, including disciplinary boundaries and academic/non academic divisions.

Roy Shuker discusses attempts by those producing *Sites* to develop “a distinctively New Zealand cultural studies” and an appropriate mode of “academic practice”. This is an issue that has also concerned the Canterbury working party on Cultural Studies. What is distinctive about this programme that locates it in Aotearoa/New Zealand at this point in time? The core statement about cultural studies developed by the working party suggests that cultural studies offers conceptual tools that can be used to analyse debate about ‘biculturalism’ and ‘multiculturalism’ in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Some of the courses included in the programme have a strong focus on the specificity of this context; they include: Te Ao Hurihuri: The Westernisation of Nineteenth Century Maori Society; Te Taura Whakairo: Maori Art - The Continuum; Te Ara Motuhake: Twentieth Century Maori Politics; the Sociology of Ethnicity; Post Colonial Writing; and Pacific Arts - Transition and Change.

What is the place of sociology within the cultural studies programme at Canterbury? The programme has been designed so that students can pursue a range of different

pathways within the programme. One of those pathways involves completing the second year course on social theory offered by the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. Other routes into the third year programme are a course on popular culture and the media offered by American Studies, a course on postcolonialism offered in Gender Studies, a cultural studies course on cultural collection and display offered in English and a mass audiences course offered by the Department of Mass Communication. A number of courses in sociology have been identified as optional courses for students preparing to enter level three courses in cultural studies; they include the sociology of sport and leisure, globalisation, ethnicity and the sociology of everyday life. Sociologists will contribute to analysis of global economic mechanisms of cultural production, consumer preferences and advertising, Internet culture, the politics of indigeneity, and the social relations within which ideas, texts and artefacts are produced, displayed, promoted, circulated and consumed. Colleagues in the anthropology programme will provide cross-cultural analyses of the socio-relational aspects of bodily substances, the aesthetics of gardens and the politics surrounding the production and circulation of cultural artefacts. Student preferences within this programme are as yet unknown. Will their interests be primarily in the textual analysis of novels, Internet sites, magazines, films and television? Will they be interested in the political economy of cultural production? Will this programme just extend the opportunities of those in the humanities, or will it become a significant option for students who are primarily enrolled in the social sciences?

Students who meet the course requirements will be able to enter the third year cultural studies programme in 2002. They will do the level three core course that runs for a full year and one of a range of third year courses that are double or cross-coded. It is anticipated that most of these students will be enrolled in double majors and combine Cultural Studies with Sociology, Theatre and Film studies, Gender Studies, Anthropology, Art History, German, Russian, American Studies, English and Mass Communication. Since approval for the programme from CUAP has only recently been obtained, it has been difficult to promote the programme. However, a web site is now being developed and publicity about the programme will be included in material made available to those visiting high schools in the next few months. The working party has been disbanded and a board of studies is currently being established.

The cultural studies programme at Canterbury encourages an interdisciplinary orientation among students. Many of the academic staff who developed the programme and argued it through the Arts Faculty are committed to interdisciplinary research, writing and teaching. They vary, however, in their commitment to the ongoing importance of disciplines and disciplinary based teaching as a continuing component of academic work. For some, disciplines like History, Geography, Anthropology, Sociology and English are vestiges of old framings of intellectual endeavour. Others are positive about the sometimes uncomfortable coexistence of traditional disciplines and critical interdisciplinary work. Some of those developing this programme are primarily interested in academic work that is best described as 'postdisciplinary'; others consider that interdisciplinarity recognises the contributions of those with exposure to varied ways of framing problems and different skills in research and analysis. Cultural studies can embrace disciplinary breadth and depth while also resisting the constraints of disciplinary boundaries (Newton, Kaiser and Ono, 1998: 547-8).

Shuker refers to an early editorial in the *New Zealand Cultural Studies Working Group Journal* in which Brennon Wood argued that cultural studies was too “departmentalised” to produce “a coherent notion of what constitutes the peculiarly New Zealand culture”. The programme at Canterbury continues to exhibit, even celebrate, these 'departmentalized' features. However, one of the stated goals of the programme is to enhance communication between those involved in similar projects in different departments and potentially to grow research, writing and publishing endeavours. Whether this occurs will depend on the time and energy of those whose courses are included in the programme and on the next stage of this project - the development of a postgraduate cultural studies programme that will enhance students' opportunities to pursue transdisciplinary projects using the expertise of academics in different departments/disciplines.

As Ted Striphas indicates, studying the institutionalisation of cultural studies involves attention to specific institutions and organisational contexts (Striphas, 1998: 453). The Canterbury cultural studies programme is being implemented against the background of proposals to ‘restructure’ the university - to create ‘super-departments’, to consolidate disciplines into ‘schools’, to diminish the number of faculties and introduce a system of executive deans (Darryl Le Grew, 2001). Academic initiatives like cultural studies that de-emphasise disciplinarity have been identified with managerialist commitments to restructure universities and ‘undo’ disciplines in the interests of ‘efficiency’ and ‘relevance’ (Readings, 1996: 39). Striphas (1998: 461) suggests that those promoting cultural studies need to address the possibility that its commitment to interdisciplinarity “colludes with the larger strategies of corporatization/capitalization in the university.” Restructuring within a university that has been characterised by a relatively ‘flat’ departmental structure may not be the ideal context in which to enhance collegiality and consolidate voluntary intellectual ties between those involved in different facets of cultural studies. On the other, hand ‘engaged’ cultural studies could be a resource as members of this university respond to the challenges of restructuring. This may be the test of whether cultural studies in this environment is just ‘a turn to culture’ or a basis for active engagement in the politics of culture, including the production and distribution of knowledge within tertiary education.

Notes

1. Roy Shuker indicates that his account of the evolution of *Sites* is a personal one. This discussion is also a set of personal reflections - others might offer different accounts of the same set of processes. I was one of seven members of the Arts Faculty Working Party on Cultural Studies convened by Associate Professor Howard McNaughton (English) in late 1999.

2. See for example:

CULTSTUD-L <http://www.cas.usf.edu/communication/rodman/cultstud/index.html>

Cultural Studies and Critical Theory <http://eserver.org/theory/>

Critical Approaches to Culture, Communications + Hypermedia

<http://www.eciad.bc.ca/~rburnett/>

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