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CROSS CULTURAL DOUBLE TALK: COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES WITHIN EDU-TOURISM

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Abstract

The massive acceleration of international student mobility in recent years has provided an eclectic (short and long term) cultural influx into Australia. Sitting somewhere between structured immigration and international tourism, this influx effectively constitutes edu-tourism, in which students seek to experience education and local culture over a period of several weeks, months or even years. It is through the hybrid nature of this edu-tourism, that the complex interconnection of culture, languages and education is highlighted, revealing both significant advantages and flaws. If we are to value education above it being merely a tradable commodity, it is clear that it must also be about enhancing the 'social good' and genuinely improving intercultural communications and outcomes. The increasing demands of work, play, economic and political survival within the global community require that we become interculturally competent citizens. In order to achieve such competence, it is therefore essential to deepen cultural awareness and empathy through maximising effective interpersonal experiences. While edu-tourist students do interact to an extent within class cohorts and organised social activities, there remain serious limitations. Classes may not offer sufficient cultural diversity; social activities, whilst popular, may serve to be culturally divisive, rather than inclusive, thus hindering the cultural integration process. The authors of this paper, in their capacities as university educators (one in Strategic Communications and Gender Studies and the other in languages and intercultural communication research), have observed student intercultural engagement in their classes and on the university campus. Their observations show consistent patterns of behaviours and recurring issues, which led them to clarify challenges and recommend ways for higher education providers to develop deeper cultural ties through specific communication opportunities.

Keywords: education, edu-tourism, intercultural competence, intercultural awareness

Introduction

According to Hall (1981, pp16-17),

There is not one aspect of human life that is not touched and altered by culture. This means personality, how people express themselves (including shows of emotion), the way they think, how they move, how problems are solved, how their cities are planned and laid out, how transportation systems function and are organized, as well as how economic and government systems are put together and function.

Since the introduction of the Colombo Plan in the 1950s, Australia has been a significant provider of education to foreign students (Oakman & Lowe, 2004). Originally a bi-lateral aid scheme designed to raise the economic and educational standards of people in the developing nations in the Asia-Pacific region, the Colombo Plan has moved on from provision of aid and education, maturing into a plan for Co-operative Economic and Social Development in Asia and the Pacific. Its legacy in terms of intergovernmental co-operation for education however, has ensured that Australia gained status as an internationally recognised provider of quality education and has (to date) been well positioned as a major educational 'exporter'. As international travel and communications have become faster, easier, more time and cost effective, traditional geographic and cultural boundaries have become somewhat blurred, making it increasingly common for students from around the globe to seek educational qualifications and credits in more than one country, many of whom choose to study in Australia as edu-tourists. As a consequence of this global education shift, much of the value of contemporary education now focuses on the acquisition of cultural competence. The associated skills, gained by highly mobile students through an eclectic cultural education, are seen by many as desirable or even essential in the new global marketplace (Pedersen, Neighbors, Larimer & Lee 2011; Marginson & van der Wende 2007). Internationalisation of curricula is now expected and is crucial in maintaining the integrity of higher educational offerings. Enhanced programs have become commonplace and include student exchange, study abroad, internships and experiential programs. These further emphasise the expressed desire for intercultural experience, as graduates now are increasingly likely to work either locally in culturally diverse companies or in foreign countries. Furthermore, whilst a significant proportion of foreign students do return to their countries after completing their Australian education, many desire to remain here and pursue further study and/or permanent residency in which they seek to become part of a different and multicultural society. It is critical therefore, that the higher education sector in Australia be actively engaged in developing multicultural integrity through a holistic approach in its higher education offerings.

According to the Student Visa Program Quarterly Report 31 March 2013, there are currently 332,359 international student visa holders in Australia across 8 classes of student visa, the bulk of these (59%) being in the higher education (visa subclass 573) sector. This overall number does not include those who visit on non-institution or personal intercultural travel experiences, as they enter on tourist visas.

All students captured under the Student Visa Program are enrolled in various institutionally based programs, of both short (exchange/study abroad) and long duration (high school and pathway programs, full undergraduate or postgraduate degrees). The majority of those, by nature of the visas granted, constitute the aforementioned edu-tourists.

The Report does not provide a breakdown of nationalities within the higher education sector, however, Bond University enrolment statistics over time reveal that its international student body hails from up to 80 different nations in any given trimester.

Although the edu-tourist students entering on these visa programs enjoy temporary residency, this lifestyle presents unique cultural challenges. As those students are not part of a structured immigration and assimilation scheme, these challenges may serve to either culturally include or culturally isolate them. Whilst certain program initiatives and collateral materials exist to help foreign students integrate and to avoid culture shock, such as those run by International Student Advisers' Network of Australia (ISANA), or individual university events, these tend to be preliminary advisories around study events or offered as part of orientation. They do not however, provide ongoing support mechanisms or offer explanations of cultural practices beyond those of the host country, and neither do they indicate potential levels and types of cultural diversity. Many students feel competent with intercultural experiences in their own domestic cultural environment but do not realise the increased complexities when their intercultural engagement with many different cultures occurs in a foreign environment (Janus & Smythe 2012).

Whilst there are ongoing migration programs for those seeking permanent residency in Australia, with the inevitable short and long-term cultural adjustment issues, the authors' focus is on the academic sojourners, the edu-tourists who we encounter on a daily basis in the higher education arena. We believe that these students can be valuable ambassadors in building an enlightened intercultural community and that by the courage of their academic adventure, they are already highly motivated to engage in new cultural experiences. Therefore, in seeking to identify issues specific to cultural inclusion in Australian higher education, we began by asking ourselves five questions:

- The first, was what exactly were we trying to address?
- Secondly which instances of intercultural interaction work most effectively and which show disconnects?
- Thirdly, how can we best use this information in adapting our teaching environment to encourage a cultural shift in understanding?
- Fourthly what are the finer details as to how we can effectively involve students, administration, support staff, families and the local community?
- Finally, what other opportunities (external to the University) exist to bridge cultural gaps?

To help us clarify and further define issues and challenges, we created a Mindmap. From our observations and findings in each of these areas, we determined that any method(s) must involve a multi-faceted approach.

As part of this initial analysis we needed some clarification of terminology. For instance, how do we define cultural interaction? Do we talk about cross-cultural or intercultural? Whilst the term 'cross-cultural' appears to focus on identifying cultural similarities and differences (Kim & Ebesu Hubbard 2007, p228), 'intercultural' is more appropriately used as being inclusive and about convergence (Goby 2007, p426). We have therefore used intercultural as our definition.

In developing the framework for our Mindmap, we therefore began with the classic journalists' questions of who, what, where, when, how and why, and examined each in the light of intercultural issues in the higher education sector, and particularly through the lens

of our combined experience of many years teaching at Bond University. As seen on Fig 1. Mindmap, we asked ‘why’, ‘where’, ‘what’, ‘when’ and ‘how’.

‘Why’ is intercultural communication critical from the University perspective? Apart from obvious communication, education, and cultural tolerance, we considered the cultural integrity of our course offerings and perceived public image.

We then addressed the ‘where’ or situations in which intercultural understanding is crucial. These areas range from the broad areas of the global economic marketplace, legal systems, human rights, religious beliefs, international diplomacy, the workplace, education right through to the areas of interpersonal relationships and including marriages.

This led us to ask ‘what’ or which specific instances affect higher education and in particular, our own University. These instances are diverse and include educational course offerings, government regulations, the economy, technology, differing expectations, socialisation and ultimately graduate career paths.

The next stage was to focus on ‘when’ these issues could be (or were already being) incorporated into the whole student experience and detail:

‘How’ we can initiate specific events and activities in order to promote even more effective intercultural engagement. Lastly, of course, we examined potential concerns and known challenges that may hinder any initiatives.

We explored the topic considering how to integrate numerous and diverse perspectives. It immediately became evident that it was necessary to take a pluralistic approach in recognising the number and complexity of cultural groups and cultural interests and identify ways to truly listen to the different ideas and opinions that contribute to creating democratic and global cultural identities (Eck, D.L., 2006). This pluralist approach focuses on more than just tolerance and indeed is an energetic embracing of diversity through active engagement, dialogue and recognition of differing cultural commitments. We looked at the different and changing teaching methodologies, technologies and learning engagement, and how they relate to intercultural understanding. In framing the essence of our vision, we were inspired by the wisdom of John Henry Newman (1909) in his treatise on ‘What is a University’:

If we wish to become exact and fully furnished in any branch of knowledge which is diversified and complicated, we must consult the living man and listen to his living voice.....the general principles of any study you may learn by books at home; but the detail, the colour, the tone, the air, the life which makes it live in us, you must catch all these from those in whom it lives already.

In the context of the above questions and reflected in our Mindmap, we sought to identify the type and location of higher educational encounters that could lead to cultural misunderstandings and also those occasions that can become comfortable and engaging cultural meeting grounds. We identified several interactions as the meeting points in which culture plays a significant role; they include classroom settings, campus events, student social events; encounters with faculty, administration and support staff, as well as within the wider local community.

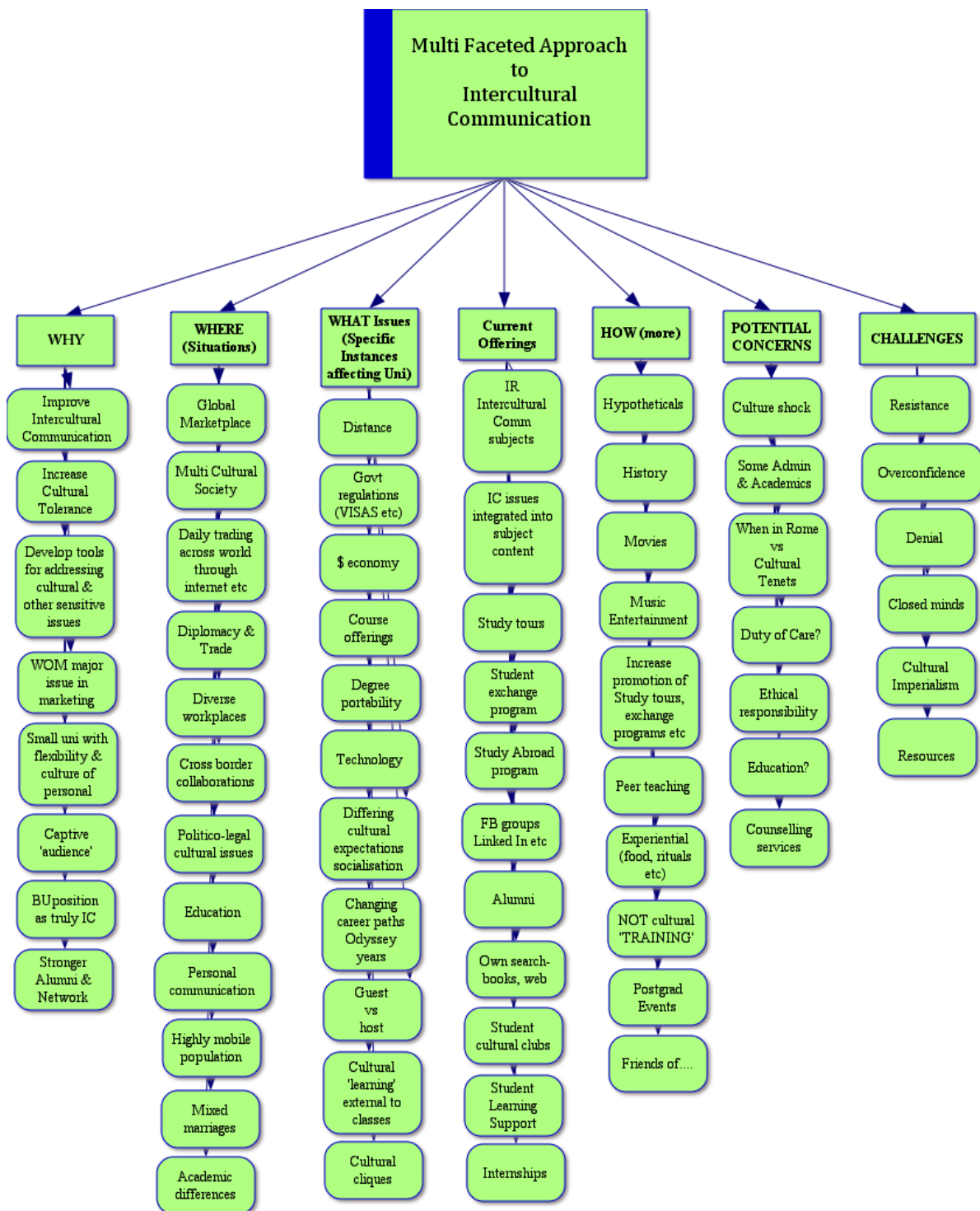


Fig 1. Mindmap

In examining these, it became apparent that whilst we are talking predominantly about communication between those parties, students themselves have an almost instinctive gravitation towards creating a 'third space' or 'third place' in which they feel they can interact comfortably without abandoning their own cultural values, behaviours or identities. Bhabha (1990) originally coined the term 'third space' to define this phenomenon and the concept was expanded by Liddicoat, Crozet and Bianco (1999) who used the term 'third place' to describe a similar position between interacting cultures by effectively creating a unique, non-threatening and neutral interactive space. In research relating to academic

sojourners, Patron (2007) further highlighted the works of Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001) and Liddicoat et al (1999) for their salience to the study. Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001) suggest that:

In a multicultural ambience, multiple identities are negotiated by young people through their subtly differing language attitudes and behaviours across and within a number of discourse settings. As the contact situations may affect the re-negotiation of their cultural identity, this was found to be a prominent feature. They suggest language ideologies have a significant impact on individuals and groups in different ways that may result in marginalisation or general exclusion. Academic sojourners need to negotiate their identity by establishing a comfortable place for themselves in a foreign milieu. Otherwise they cannot function effectively. Acceptance of their ethnic practices, language use, and traditions are just as important for a successful acculturative experience and this needs to be appreciated by not only educators but fellow classmates (Patron, 2007, p.41).

Having found some answers to our five initial questions, this raised yet another question, which was how does this all connect with specific instances of higher education?

Being outside one's comfort zone can be unsettling and discomfiting. For international students this can become overwhelming and distressing and have a negative effect on their whole intercultural experience. Often identified as culture shock, this can be caused by numerous factors and can manifest in different ways. Culture shock is a term coined by Oberg (1960) to describe the anxieties and attendant challenges in coping that occur when we are disconnected from the familiar signs, symbols, behaviours and interactions of our own culture. This, according to Weaver (1994), and further elaborated by Patron (2007), can trigger incidences of self-doubt, disorientation and internal reflection of personal values and beliefs. Whilst overcoming these challenges may ultimately lead to greater flexibility and self-confidence, students initially may experience an identity crisis as they adapt to a new culture. During this transitory cultural acclimation phase, we have observed that some keep and some shed their traditional values and beliefs.

International students may be further disadvantaged if such personal discomfort or cultural disorientation precludes them from fully participating in classroom activities. This can occur when they encounter unfamiliar interpersonal communication, academic practices or course expectations. Several significant and complex issues may arise, many of which are best anticipated by referring to Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (2001). The theory, which was initially developed to identify and measure the effects of differing aspects of cultural values, proposed that cultural differences revealed themselves in many different forms. These include: masculinity-femininity (task vs person orientation); individualist vs collectivist (me vs we orientation); uncertainty avoidance (risk comfort vs risk aversion) and power distance (deference to status or rank).

Subsequent research by Hofstede and Minkov (2010) added the dimensions of long term vs short term orientation and indulgence vs self-restraint. Whilst these categories and values are not the only issues, and do not account for individual values or for changing social behaviours, they nevertheless do provide a useful means of identifying some of the differences in values and beliefs that can result in cultural impasse. Building on Hofstede's work is the larger and more complex study of global leadership and organisational behaviour effectiveness (GLOBE) undertaken by House (1998) and expanded by House, Javidan &

Mansour (2004) Ashkenasy, Trevor-Roberts & Earnshaw (2002); Gupta, Surie, Javidan & Chhokar (2002); Gupta, Hanges & Dorfman (2003); Javidan & House (2002); Kabasakal & Bodur (2002); Szabo, Brodbeck, Den Hartog, Reber, Weibler & Wunderer (2002). Although this research is predominantly focused on intercultural issues within the business community, the cultural dimensions identified are also valuable in understanding cultural issues within the international student community. The GLOBE dimensions include assertiveness, future orientation, gender differentiation, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, individualism vs collectivism in the workplace, in-group collectivism, performance orientation and humane orientation.

A further element is added by the earlier works of Hall (1981), who introduced the importance of context. Hall differentiates high context cultures as those where the context in which messages are delivered is of equal or greater importance than the message itself) from low context cultures (where the message is dominant). China for instance is a high context culture in which interpersonal communications, social courtesies, relationship building, manners, behaviours, concern for face are important. This contrasts with low context countries such as the United States in which relationships are secondary to economic outcomes. In a multicultural educational setting there are myriad opportunities for each of these elements to influence outcomes, potentially culminating in either co-operation or impasse.

Many of these elements further reinforce differing values or beliefs associated with academic practices (Godwin 2009), particularly in relation to work ethics and methods. Such differences can include perceptions of shame and importance of face (Ting-Toomey, 2004). Less evident, there may also be powerful and entrenched beliefs around gender equality, intellectual property and understanding of class participation. Foreign students are expected to adjust to all of this whilst meeting academic, social and familial expectations and obligations.

In formal teaching sessions for instance, students may be reluctant to question a teacher, speak up or engage in conversation; they may lack confidence in conversational or language skills; have a fear of making mistakes, appearing foolish or offending others, or causing embarrassment or loss of face. Such reluctance, fear and the resultant elective silence substantially increase the likelihood of misunderstanding and intercultural communication failure.

In relation to the skills element of the learning environment, we observed that students often found it difficult to take notes during lectures due to linguistic shock or they simply tuned out, because they find speed of oral delivery overwhelming. Additionally, they are often unable to decipher the (predominantly) Australian vernacular used by lecturers and students, let alone the varying accents or local humour references used in discussions, (Patron 2007, 2009). Students can easily reach a stage of pseudo-listening where there is a benign smile on their faces while in reality they have 'switched off' because of information overload or linguistic shock.

While these issues are relatively easy to note in a classroom setting, cultural challenges go far beyond the classroom. With students from multiple nationalities and cultures congregating in a common but alien cultural setting, we note that there are day-to-day social and more prosaic encounters that can profoundly affect their cultural experience. Therefore

we must look further taking a more holistic approach, incorporating formal class sessions plus social interactions and other experiential events.

In addition to the obvious classroom situations mentioned, personal cultural issues can have a powerful effect. Effective recognition of those issues and culturally appropriate responses can engender significant and positive understanding, whilst failure can be seriously detrimental. Although we have identified teaching and learning challenges, it is issues in the personal arena that may become more significant than those of the classroom. The authors have identified that the fundamental elements that cause intercultural communication issues for international students are often not identified by the students themselves, or the people they are communicating with. Those fundamentals include the fact that the students are mostly young people (18-30 years of age), away from home, away from their traditional support system, culture, family and friends. In order to illustrate those culturally related personal issues that may arise, we present four case studies from past student cohorts at Bond University. We have used initials and changed any potentially identifying items in order to protect the identity of the individuals.

Case Study 1

B from India (a solid credit/distinction student) was in his final semester as a Communications undergraduate. He had already been accepted for a prestigious internship, to commence immediately after graduation. He had also been granted a postgraduate scholarship to enable him to undertake his Master's Degree, after which he planned to apply for a Graduate Visa. He hoped to work in his chosen industry and ultimately apply for residency. I was therefore surprised to hear that he stood to lose his internship, scholarship and inevitably his chance for residency due to failing two of his final exams. We are a small University community, and therefore get to know our students quite well, developing respect for the capabilities and work ethic that many of them (such as B) demonstrated. Concerned, I met with B and discovered that he had sat both exams in a seriously sleep deprived state after arriving from interstate where he was fulfilling family obligations by attending to the needs of a dying family member. Despite University provisions for deferral in such instances, he believed that it was wrong for him to ask, and that to do so would cause shame. He expressed that he felt that his life was no longer worth living and that he had now let his family down. After further investigation and meetings of the relevant academic disciplines, he was permitted to undertake supplementary exams, which he passed well, thus reinstating his study and career path. He duly completed the internship, his postgraduate degree, is working in his chosen field, married and living in Australia. It is interesting here to note that students from western cultures have considerably less hesitancy in applying for deferrals in such a situation, thus highlighting how differing cultural values can actually affect lives.

Case Study 2:

L was from a former Soviet state. She was 20 years old, and had a boyfriend that her very strict and traditional father fiercely disapproved of. Her father was scathing in his communications with L and according to her, threatened her unless she obeyed his every directive. She was becoming more and more withdrawn and became painfully thin as the weeks went by. I was concerned but kept a watchful distance. One day, she broke down and confided her situation and fear to me. Despite the geographic distance between her and her father, she clearly feared him, and was in a state of considerable distress. Whilst we do not invite such confidence and try to refer students to the proper counselling services, it is virtually impossible to reject such an appeal by someone so distressed. I listened then encouraged her to see a counsellor, which she did, only to return in an even worse emotional

state. The counsellor she saw did not grasp the cultural issues in this family and advised the student not to be intimidated by her father. The counsellor did not seem to believe that any threat from a parent could be serious. After further reassurance, L saw another counsellor, one who was familiar with her cultural background and who sent me a report detailing her belief that L's fears were very real and should be taken seriously. With the support of this culturally aware counsellor and all her course teachers, L was able to eventually complete her degree and graduate.

Case Study 3

P was sent by her socially and intellectually elite Malaysian family to undertake her Bachelor's Degree at Bond University several years ago. Part of her program included a French and Spanish Minor, providing me the opportunity to build a good rapport with her. During her last semester, the pressures to complete assignments, study for exams and achieve high grades were compounded by personal issues. P suffered severe depression and loneliness, but concealed her distress to avoid shame. Issues concerning shame and face are critical for many cultures and the likelihood of deferring graduation due to failed subjects was a burden she could no longer withstand. P felt she could not approach the counsellors as she, (along with many of her counterparts) was culturally precluded from disclosing personal matters to a third party outside of her culture. Suggestions that she (or indeed other Asian students in her predicament) seek mental health clinicians often meet with horrified resistance because mental problems are highly stigmatised in her part of the world (Aubrey, 1991). The assumption that their situation could be treated with derision or dismissed as unworthy of consideration is a perception that many Asian students have. Many of them consider deferral of exams and extensions for assignments as unethical unless there is a life or death situation. This differs from Anglo-Saxon cultures.

P could not countenance the shame of facing her family with the looming failure of three of her subjects. Like many of her Asian counterparts, the challenge of the international exchange was instrumentally motivated as academic achievement was the single most important goal (Aubrey, 1991). P had become suicidal and approached me because she thought that I would be empathetic. It was an awkward position to be in, being privy to personal information that I was specifically asked to conceal. Professionally, I owed the student a duty of care and personally I believed that I could not morally betray her trust. With patience, empathy and support, P passed her subjects and graduated on the due date. A year later, she invited me to her wedding in Kuala Lumpur, which I could not attend. I did however visit her city a few years later, and she proudly introduced me to her family. She confided that my cultural understanding and empathy for her predicament had been instrumental in her ability to overcome the cultural challenges that had threatened to derail her formal education.

Case Study 4

Teamwork is an essential feature of educational activities at Bond University. Cultural dissonance is particularly apparent in many in-class contexts where diverse cultures clash as a result of lack of understanding and inadequate patience and latitude for those whose native tongue is not English. In a recent language course, a Saudi Arabian married woman was unwittingly paired with a young African American student for preparation of the oral proficiency components of the course, for mid-semester and final examinations. Many cultures tend to gravitate towards those with whom they perceive most cultural similarity and sensitivity but often, language learners will turn to the person sitting next to them to undertake such exercises. This is particularly the case in a beginners' class where few

students are known to each other and may choose their partners without giving consideration to compatibility factors such as linguistic proficiency, age, gender, level of experience in language learning or maturity.

While the cultural differences between the two students manifested early in the semester, I only became aware of it prior to the first examinations when the Saudi woman sought my intervention. The issues reported were those of shame and face, predicated by a lack of respect, perceived bad behaviour, rudeness and disrespect for fixed appointments and miscommunication. To avoid the situation becoming untenable for both parties I acted as mediator, but separately, in an effort to find common ground and encouraged respect for each other's cultural traditions. This was not perceived as appropriate initially because of embarrassment and ill feeling resulting from the disclosure of arguments between the two. However, with a little empathy on both sides and a decision to seek mutually respectful grounds on which to work, both students, agreeing to disagree, moved forward and succeeded in their assigned tasks. The American girl was eventually invited to be a guest at the home of the Saudi woman.

As this situation is not uncommon in our culturally mixed classes, it is useful to remind students that it is imperative that they be culturally aware and sensitive to cultural distinctions at the start of the semester. With an early understanding that they can avoid such uncomfortable and sometime painful situations by engaging in dual perspective, such incidences are becoming less frequent. By focusing on their similarities instead of their obvious differences, an atmosphere of mutual respect can be established at the beginning of the course and real friendship networks can be enhanced.

Findings and Recommendations

At Bond University, we pride ourselves on our unqualified support for cultural diversity and the pastoral care of our students. We are at times expected to go above and beyond the call of duty to protect, guide and advise our international students who do not believe that their personal issues can be resolved satisfactorily by those who are perceived to be in positions of authority. Clearly, issues concerning cultural dissonance are of profound significance during intercultural exchanges and incidents often occur despite our best efforts. In our experience, we believe that tertiary institutions, administrative bodies, educators and academics must do their utmost to respond to problems that arise, in the most humane way possible to avoid potentially harmful outcomes.

The Classroom and the Learning Environment

The University learning environment is populated by those who see themselves primarily as academics, and those who see themselves first and foremost as educators. For academics the primary duties are research and published works whilst educators are focused on teaching and learning, with both of these roles being integral to higher education and learning. The authors see themselves as being within the category of educators and believe we are amongst the most exposed to the cultural issues of international students given that our primary role places us at the proverbial 'coalface'. We have numerous opportunities to actively engage international students in the learning process, and understand how important it is that we all become more culturally conversant with each other, and in pursuit of this, how it is essential to examine issues through a culturally sensitive lens.

We have observed that the most effective incorporation of cultural interactions into the curriculum or teaching opportunities rests with active and mindful student participation. The students individually and collectively possess extensive historical and current knowledge of the beliefs and practices of their own cultures and can reflect and share in a young adult environment, how recent and current global shifts affect both their cultures and life expectations (Knowles, Holton & Swanson 2012). This wealth of information forms part of an extensive and invaluable resource for academics, educators and support staff, enabling them to learn about the students and the issues that potentially affect them and their educational experience.

Informal interpersonal conversation or discussions therefore, can be effective in bringing to light seemingly insignificant issues that can profoundly change cultural comfort and perceptions. Such exchanges also serve as effective and compelling peer teaching opportunities (Chang 2008), as each individual's appeal for genuine understanding, need for interpersonal connection and integration in a new environment are powerful motivators. In order to ensure that we continue to effectively and significantly increase levels of cultural competence among students, teaching and administration staff through both the curriculum and daily interactions, we further analysed our collective experiences (over a combined 32 plus years of teaching on the Bond campus) and noted several measures that students report to be effective.

In order to encourage effective intercultural communication and understanding, it is important to focus on:

- Encouraging a strongly social environment with considerable opportunity for open interpersonal interaction
- Suspension of judgement
- Encouraging cultural curiosity
- Understanding the foundations and power of perception and bias
- Dual perspective
- Engaging in conversation over instruction
- Seeking class opportunities for peer teaching
- Creating opportunities for hypothetical topics discussed relevant to intercultural experiences, whenever possible including others from outside the class to broaden the perspectives

An informal but themed tutorial session, run in January 2011 in Susie Ting's Gender Communication class at Bond University, showed how powerful cultural exchange can be and it was through reflecting on this tutorial and analysing the extremely positive response from the participants, that we as educators began to look critically at intercultural issues that permeate the fabric of University life, and how it can actually make or break the experience.

At Bond our tutorial groups are designed to be an average of 12 students, to encourage interactivity and participation, and this also provides educators with a unique opportunity to get to know students and to observe student behaviours. As part of Bond's Gender Communication course, each student is required to be responsible for one tutorial session on his or her chosen topic. Students are permitted to team up with one other to share the topic and their brief is to engage their peers in the chosen topic in the one hour discussion session. During the second week of February 2011 with Valentine's Day fast approaching, two students who shared the topic of "Gender and Culture" elected to conduct a panel discussion on the topic of 'Love, Sex, Dating and Marriage in Your Culture'. In addition to the usual

cohort, they invited students from other faculties and courses and from as many different cultural backgrounds as they could find, luring them with the promise of pizza.

The response was excellent. Apart from the local Australian students in the class, we had students from Argentina, Chile, Denmark, France, Germany, India, Korea Norway, Malaysia, Singapore, Sweden, Saudi Arabia and the USA.

In the environment of open interpersonal discussion, curiosity, shared interest in relationships, the original panel became a broader discussion. As comfort grew, the questions became more frank and more probing, but were always respectful. There was at times great hilarity, particularly when cultures with seemingly great differences divulged that their parents all gave the same advice. The one hour session turned into two and it was only when the next class arrived that the students had to be herded from the room, the discussion moving then spontaneously to the corridor. As the class left the room, a Danish student observed that the students had more similarities than they had differences and asked why people focused so much on the differences. The conversation in the corridor turned to the topic of the class itself. Some of the students said that this was the kind of interaction they had come to the University to find. They went on to say that although they were in mixed culture classes, that each culture still tended to congregate with its own, often due to language or other cultural reasons (Briguglio 1998). They also pointed out that they felt that student-organised social events at times marginalised them because of differing beliefs and values as well as social themes that precluded them from alcohol or certain foods or activities. They pointed out that they were visitors in a host nation and could not invite themselves into the lives of local students or families, but that they would very much like to have that kind of opportunity.

Some specific comments made were:

“This is the kind of learning we came here for”

“We don’t get this in other classes or in the social activities offered by the Uni”

“We tend to stay with our own groups in classes, eating and socialising”

“We seem to have more similarities than difference, so why do we focus on the differences?”

We need to engage students in discussion and convince them that attending class is of value. The way in which to engage them in a topic is through tolerance and acceptance of all cultural groups. This can then lead to the personalisation of a topic, which makes students more eager to participate. When groups of individuals discuss and question issues it produces results and changes perceptions. A culturally dynamic shift can consequently occur in this context where it is safe to give an opinion even on controversial or politically incorrect issues. Interest can be generated and students can see the relevance of the discussion. Motivation occurs through relevance, engagement and contribution when one is given the opportunity to be heard and to speak about personal challenges without being judged (Abusalem, 2012).

The message here is twofold. Firstly, local students, within a cohort (particularly those who have never travelled outside Australia) must be encouraged to develop awareness and empathy for the international students who find the process of adjustment to a different cultural and social environment confronting or alienating and include them in their groups and social events. Secondly, it is important to consider ways that the University community and the local community can develop greater initiatives to actively and consistently foster

social and cultural interaction without being overwhelmed by misperceptions of ‘political correctness’.

As an aside here, an interesting definition of ‘political correctness’, is derived from an annual contest by Griffith University, Australia in 2012 that called for the most appropriate definition of a contemporary term. The winning student wrote:

*Political correctness is a doctrine, fostered by a delusional, illogical minority, and rapidly promoted by mainstream media, which holds forth the proposition that it is entirely possible to pick up a piece of s*** by the clean end*

This definition is pertinent in our discussions as adherence to issues that are deemed politically incorrect is what often impedes progress in discussions that attempt to seek a solution to current problems. Through less formal and even a light-hearted approach, the most culturally sensitive issues can be examined without offence to any party as the premise implies an even playing field for all participants.

Another initiative is a hybrid social/educational model such as the one that was developed and run by Bond University Professor Bill Krebs, over several semesters. This was known as The Bond Experience, and incorporated several weeks of travel with educational experiences. Unfortunately this program fell victim to the global financial crisis, which reduced the numbers of international students who sought this option. In a conversation with us, Professor Krebs described the initiative and the student response:

‘Those programs I created and ran for three years were on the borderline between education and tourism. Our programs were tailor-made as a crossover of tourist/sightseeing experience and education. So we did Uluru, King’s Canyon, Federal Houses of Parliament, Alice Springs, Telegraph Station, Barrier Reef, surfing beaches, etc., but studied, and discussed in-situ a host of topics covering Australian demographics, history, government, ecological and tourism issues, Australian English, etc. The students took home university credits in two subjects whose titles are self-explanatory: Australian History and Culture, and an Introduction to Australian Environmental Issues. The reported response to these “Australian Experience” programs from those who took them was gratifyingly and often movingly enthusiastic.’

The focus therefore, must not be a passive one. We agree with Craft, Chappell and Twining (2008) that it is crucial that students *actively learn* to be discerning with the information they obtain whether through social interactions, online or media sources, as well as through more formal academic lectures.

Social Setting

Whilst on the class cohort or micro scale many initiatives are already being undertaken, there remains however, the challenge of nurturing intercultural competence within the wider student body and of course within the academic and administrative areas.

In seeking more active participation and engagement, it is evident that development of cultural competence most effectively occurs through developing real understanding of attitudes, beliefs, teachings which then (hopefully) translate into actions, practices and ultimately more informed social interactions and behaviours. A time-honoured method to develop greater understanding is that of social interaction, of experiencing food, manners,

language, music, arts, architecture, design and technologies of other cultures. (Hobgood-Brown, 2007).

Challenges

The comprehensive literature review scrutinised in Patron's (2007) book, *Culture and Identity in Study Abroad Contexts: After Australia, French without France* reinforces the duty of care that tertiary institutions must observe in order to pre-empt and avoid the difficulties that international students may experience. In today's global village where intercultural exchanges are *de rigueur* there is an urgent need to address the problems that manifest in stressors during the difficult phases of the adjustment process. If educators fail to negotiate with sensitivity, empathy and understanding, any tensions that may arise on the basis of race, creed or philosophical beliefs, the consequences may be dire for international students. The impact their experiences have on their self-esteem, their psychological health and more importantly their cultural identity cannot be ignored.

Furthermore, the implications of unfavourable attitudes between diverse cultures during exchanges, as well as negative stereotypes can cause conflict and have lasting effects on international relations. This can ultimately affect further student exchange programs. Indeed, as tertiary institutions compete for international students in today's economic climate, they risk losing the opportunity to harness the potential that this invaluable commodity represents. In order to facilitate the process of adjustment, university instructors and administrators need to approach this issue holistically.

The educational environment especially in its role of 'home away from home' is ideally positioned to significantly elevate cultural competence by incorporating many integrative cultural interactions in the course of teaching sessions together with social events. One difficulty here lies in how to effectively integrate and manage the number and complexities of cultural beliefs and practices and ensure the integrity of materials, information and methods introduced into teaching programs and social activities. Physical resources, costs and event management are also challenges, but not insurmountable ones. The students themselves are, of course, an extraordinary resource so all of these challenges are solvable through initiative, willingness and commitment. Student involvement also provides the cultural integrity essential to a true exchange of ideas, which is important in ensuring that academic and administrative staff also acquire sufficient intercultural insight, awareness of, and respect for different values and belief systems. A further challenge lies of course, in engaging those academic and administrative staff in cultural events and social occasions. Of concern to the authors is the observation they have made, that many academics, educators and administration personnel across Australian Universities shun formal cultural training as they consider themselves to be culturally aware simply because they are in the University environment and/or they have travelled internationally.

Conclusion

The challenge for educators is to grasp the importance of issues facing the international students enrolled in our classes as these individuals reach our shores with pre-conceptions based on their different nationalities, traditions and cultures. We suggest therefore that educators adjust their interactions and teaching methods to expand awareness and broaden understanding in order to better equip international students to operate in this multicultural and global environment. In the classroom, we need to focus on intercultural conversations within our respective disciplines and remain constantly vigilant in order to avoid cultural dissonance in our personal and group discourse.

We further believe that it is important to create an informal, experiential platform in the university environment where all parties—administration, academics and students are on an equal footing, one in which people can safely explore multiple perspectives through a range of activities. Many social issues only become significant after confrontation has occurred, when they can rapidly become deleterious especially when related to matters that are deeply personal and emotive.

Whilst all the motivations and ideals are admirable and (we have observed) can certainly make a profound difference, many initiatives historically have relied heavily on the goodwill, energy, passion and dedication of culturally involved academics and staff. This convinces us that there is a compelling case for universities to take a deliberate stance and establish supportive frameworks for sustainable and ongoing opportunities, events, activities and encouraging ‘friends of’ the University to embrace intercultural connectivity. This committed support would go a long way towards helping those who believe in the importance of developing genuine and enduring networks of cultural friendship, collegiality and professional integrity. The value of this cultural conversation is obvious, and what it takes first and foremost is the will and commitment of those who seek to join that intercultural conversation, no matter how many or how few.

In the words of the anthropologist Margaret Mead,

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

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