

CONSIDERATIONS: AN INTERCULTURAL APPROACH TO LEARNING AND TEACHING

The observation that VU has a culturally diverse community is not remarkable. One only has to walk around campus for a few minutes or attend a graduation to appreciate the rich diversity represented by students – and staff. In fact, when one becomes aware of the diversity on campus, you soon realise the potential of the broad range of experiences, identities and attributes in providing a rich and enriching environment for all. Diversity is core to VU and, as such, is working to ensure that principles around successful student participation and engagement reflect cultural diversity as part of its widening participation agenda. This resource series aims to initiate discussions on exploring the issue of an intercultural approach to learning and teaching. The overall aim of this series is to ensure that our classrooms harness the richness of cultural diversity and provide participants with the opportunity to further their skills and understandings.

WHAT DOES AN INTERCULTURAL APPROACH ENTAIL?

An intercultural approach recognises that diversity is part of our everyday educational reality. The approach starts with the premise that this diversity brings depth of opportunities and richness to the educational experience. The approach provides a way of ensuring that all aspects of education reflect a positive, rather than deficit, view of cultural diversity as well as, importantly, an opportunity for self-awareness through understanding. Gao (2009) proposes that it focusses on the dynamic interactions between the individual and the socio-cultural environment.

In unpacking the notion of an intercultural approach to learning and teaching, it is helpful to look at the literature on intercultural competence. Bennett and Bennett (2004, p.149) posit that:

Intercultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts.

Deardoff (2016, p. 243) refers to intercultural competence as:



An Intercultural Approach to Learning and Teaching

the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behaviour and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions.

UNESCO (2013, p.6) states that

Intercultural competences aim at freeing people from their own logic and cultural idioms in order to engage with others and listen to their ideas, which may involve belonging to one or more cultural systems.

These definitions encompass aspects of the personal interacting with difference and 'newness', in order to develop an open attitude to inquiry and learning. The learning being both reflective as well as of the 'other'. The literature on intercultural competence is based on a sense of developing understandings and skills to support the type of reflexivity that is required to be successful as an intercultural 'actor' – this will be explored further below.

HOW DO I BECOME A MORE INTERCULTURALLY INCLUSIVE EDUCATOR?

The first step to developing intercultural awareness is to consider one's own sense of culture. For instance, what experiences of education make up your own expectations of education and training? You might reflect on certain teaching approaches used, expectations of yourself as a student, assessment practices experienced, the value of education to your family and culture etc. You might also reflect on your interactions with peers, both locally and overseas, in terms of expectations and experiences of teaching and learning. In short, self-reflection is instrumental in gaining the distance required to understand how our 'culture' shapes our view of education as a practice, the values we place on education and how we approach education as a learner – and as an educationalist.

Further, each discipline is shaped by cultural practices – the complex mix of a range of influences that define a discipline might include considerations of how decisions are made, how participants interact, terms used, protocols, theories that influence thinking in the discipline and where these are derived from (e.g. Confucian, European) and so on. These are all aspects that define a 'member' of the particular discipline group that you represent as a tertiary educator.

In reflecting on aspects of learning and teaching experiences, as well as experiences of the discipline, you will note the many elements and nuances that influence personal-professional perspectives, approaches, attitudes and behaviours. As an educational practitioner, the challenge is to develop a culturally inclusive approach in the classroom. This will allow the time, space and opportunity for students to also come to identify and understand the many elements necessary to then take up their own place as a discipline representative.



WHAT IS AN INTERCULTURAL APPROACH?

An intercultural approach is evidenced through strategic design of curriculum, tasks and activities, as well as supported and facilitated interactions in the classroom. Further, through the modelling of a culturally inclusive ethos that characterises the classroom and, the discipline represented by the teacher. An interculturally responsive classroom provides an opportunity for each member to reflect and engage with diversity. Further, to develop an awareness of and ability to work in a collegiate way, reflecting attributes that commonly define global citizenship. Thoughtfully designed curriculum activities provide an effective way to move away from generalisations, stereotypes and bias to enable a learner's cultural identity, knowledge and experience legitimacy in the learning and teaching interaction.

Literature indicates that there are beneficial outcomes of a curriculum that is responsive to diversity (Bennett 2004, Griffith et al, 2016, UNESCO 2013). These outcomes include:

- developing students' knowledge,
- bringing students together to work in a collegiate manner,
- improving understanding of various perspectives and cultures,
- developing global and socially responsible citizens, and,
- responding to economic and workplace imperatives.



DOES ADOPTING AN INTERCULTURAL APPROACH MEAN I HAVE TO KNOW ABOUT A RANGE OF CULTURES?

The expectation that one becomes a cultural expert is misleading. Certainly knowledge about various cultures is always enriching to one's own understandings. Such knowledge is likely to inform educational practice. However cultures are complex, ever evolving and there are, simply put, just too many to ever be a 'cultural expert'. What is more important is to have a meta-awareness of cultures, experiences, challenges and expectations that your students are likely to have – and an open, responsive teaching approach. These two elements will provide a firm foundation for developing intercultural competence broadly. Working with students to foster a space for them to identify, articulate and share their perspectives, experiences and challenges will assist you (and peers) gain the insights required to create an interculturally inclusive learning and teaching classroom culture.

Deardoff (2006) states that in approaching education from an intercultural paradigm, students not only develop broad knowledge, but learn to critically analyse, evaluate and relate to cultural themes and experiences. This is integral to engaging students in a sense of 'belonging', to the educational institution, the discipline and more broadly. The mission for teachers is to design opportunities that challenge students to think critically and go beyond stereotypes, or a one world view approach. Working with students to question, inquire, critically reflect on readings, issues, theories etc. will provide a strong basis for moving students forward towards gaining intercultural understandings and skills.

Of course, as an expert in your field you also have knowledge and experience of the particular discipline and how students should tackle the critical questioning and examination required to graduate as members of that field/discipline.

REFLECTION ACTIVITY

A. What qualities are needed for graduates in your discipline that relate to being interculturally aware and capable?

B. Otten (2003) states that "the degree of teachers' tolerance to otherness and different styles can dwindle quickly when teaching and learning demand more time, energy, and patience". (p. 14). To what extent you agree with this statement?



RESOURCES

The Higher Education Academy, (2014). Intercultural Competencies.

https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/resources/intercultural_competencies.pdf [sourced 10 May, 2017]. Spencer-Oatey, H. (nd).

University of Warwick Understanding Intercultural Competence for Business: Insights from the eChina –UK Programme.

https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/globalpeople/resourcebank/presentation/understanding_ic_competence.pdf [sourced 10 May, 2017]

REFERENCES

Bennett, M. J. (2004). Becoming interculturally competent. In J.S. Wurzel (Ed.) *Toward multiculturalism: A reader in multicultural education*. Newton, MA: Intercultural Resource Corporation. (Originally published in *The Diversity Symposium proceedings: An Interim Step toward a Conceptual Framework for the Practice of Diversity*. Waltham, MA: Bentley College, 2002).

Deardoff, D. K. (2006). The Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization at Institutions of Higher Education in the United States, *Journal of Studies in International Education* 10:241-26.

Gao, Y.H. (2009). Language and identity: state of the art and a debate of legitimacy. In *China and English – Globalisation and the Dilemmas of Identity*, ed. J. Lo Bianco, J. Orton and Y.H. Gao, 101–19. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Griffith, R. L., Wolfeld, L., Armon, B.K. Rios, J., Liu, O. L. (2016, June 15). *Assessing Intercultural Competence in Higher Education: Existing Research and Future Directions*. ETS Research Report Series. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ets2.12112/full> [sourced 30 May 2017].

Otten, M. (2003). *Intercultural Learning and Diversity in Higher Education*, *Journal of Studies in International Education*. Spring.

UNESCO (2013). *Intercultural Competences: Conceptual and Operational Framework*. Paris, UNESCO.

Vertovec, S. (2010). Towards post-multiculturalism: Changing communities, conditions and contexts of diversity. *International Social Science Journal*, 61, 83–95.

