Internationalisation of the Curriculum

Intercultural Competence and Cultural Capability

The postcolonial term 'unhomeliness' describes the discomfort that we can feel when we encounter those whose values and beliefs are very different from our own. By remaining open to the discomfort and seeking to understand the other's – or others' – perspectives, we can develop greater intercultural understanding and competence and cultural capability. Cultural capability means recognising that we are all shaped by values and systems that have different consequences for some people and societies, often resulting in social division. Being 'culturally capable' means understanding what those values and systems are and challenging one's own thinking and behaviour about them.

The following case studies are drawn from my own experience of teaching in multicultural higher education. Discuss the one allocated to your group, focusing on the two questions following the case study.

Rosie

"I am a part-time British student. I have a family and work part-time. Doing this masters degree is a major commitment for me and I am determined to get the most out of it. I have to juggle childcare and work and other responsibilities and, as I live some distance away, I like to make the best use of my time at the university by spending most of it in the library. The course that I am doing requires students to work together on small tasks between classes as preparation for the teaching sessions. I have some experience as an adult educator and I can see the value in these strategies and what the lecturer is trying to achieve. I find the discussions with my fellow students intensely frustrating, however. First of all, they cannot pronounce words correctly and, if they can't pronounce the words, how can they begin to understand the concepts? Secondly, most of them are full-time students and therefore have so much more time than me to read and prepare. This is an interesting course and I would love to do more reading than I do, but I don't have the time. I make every effort to go to their meetings - the others are very considerate and hold them on the day that I can be there. Thirdly, I am uncomfortable with the way that they seem to defer to me much of the time. Somewhat to my shame, I have realised that it is much quicker if I suggest a way of ding a presentation, and then I can get back to the library. I am paying a lot for this course and I don't see why everything should be slowed down sometimes for the foreign students. I am enjoying the course. I like the way that the lecturer works, can see that she is seeking to be inclusive and I find the reading stimulating but – do we really have to spend time going over it at the beginning of every session"?

What are the key complexities?

How could these complexities be addressed so that all parties are supported to develop greater intercultural understanding and cultural capability?

A Hong Kong story

Before I took over as Programme Coordinator of our MEd in Hong Kong, the course that I taught was the third one in the programme. This meant that, by the time I met the student group, the group norms were established. The following is an account of a teaching experience that I had there. The course is taught intensively over the weekend, beginning on a Friday evening.

The student group was composed of roughly equal numbers of local Hong Kong people and expatriates (i.e. those from the UK, Australia, Canada, and the USA). By the end of the Friday evening in spite of using all my skills in facilitating group interaction, I was unable to encourage interaction between what I experienced as two very discrete groups. I choreographed the groups for the next 2 days so that the students were in different groups for every activity. In particular, for my "team project" activity on the Saturday afternoon, I chose local people to take the significant roles of project manager and observer, thus offering them the opportunity to take the lead and to have their voices heard.

At the tea/coffee break, on the Saturday, one of the non-local students invited me to join her and the other non-locals for coffee. At this moment it became clear to me that she and the other non-locals were going to a café in the nearby shopping centre at our break times, rather than socialising over refreshments as was our custom. My polite rejection of the invitation seemed important. I learned how important at the end of the day.

"I have really enjoyed working in a team with our Hong Kong classmates," one of the Australian students said, in the day's review. "It made me realise how much I can learn from their different perspectives. I am so pleased that you mixed us up in the groups today."

As usual, I lingered at the end of the day. Students like to talk with me, sometimes to ask questions for clarification. I am aware that they can be shy to speak in front of others and that they can feel that asking questions publicly might constitute loss of "face" for me. On this particular Saturday evening, all of the students chatting with me were local people.

"You know, Sheila, there are two groups in this room," he said.
"Do you think that I haven't noticed that? I'm trying really hard for there NOT to be two groups in this room – but you have to help me. Please, when I invite you to speak, speak! I am doing this to create a space for you to express your ideas/opinions which, as we heard earlier, the others value."

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John

John was a British PhD student. He had extensive experience of studying and teaching in several contexts including the US and the Netherlands. For him, being a PhD student in our international environment in Bristol was wonderful as it provided him with many opportunities to meet people from different parts of the world. In conversation one day, he told me the following story:

"It seems to me that students construct different spaces in our department. I choose to work in a room where students from several different cultures congregate rather than another room populated by students from one country. The latter room is a multifunctional space where they pray, work and cook food. It feels like a very foreign place and less comfortable than the other rooms. This room has more of a religious overture and, because I find that constraining, I miss out on interaction that could be beneficial. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not offended; you need the freedom to pursue your own way of life. If we're going to make people feel really welcome then perhaps we should provide separate facilities, but that sets people apart. Also, I have a tendency to greet women by kissing them on the cheek. I wouldn't dream of doing that with these students – they might think that was completely inappropriate. But perhaps my vision of their faith and culture is more restrictive than they actually are".

What are the key complexities?

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Lee

Lee was a Chinese student. He was an experienced teacher in China and a very intelligent, articulate and committed postgraduate student. He came to talk with me because he was worried about his experiences in the classes he was attending in Bristol. British students were in the majority and it seemed to him that they dominated the sessions. The lecturer, also British, spoke very quickly, used lots of words that he did not recognise and seemed to ignore those students who did not speak English as their first language. Lee's frustration was exacerbated because, when he read the handouts and recommended readings after each session, he realised that he was, in fact, very familiar with many of the concepts. He had a lot of relevant professional experience in China that he felt might be interesting to others but it seemed as if alternatives to the UK perspective were not welcomed.

What are the key complexities?

How could these complexities be addressed so that all parties are supported to develop greater intercultural understanding and cultural capability?