Orientations to cross cultural mixing on a diverse campus and beyond

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Abstract
Australian universities are sites of considerable and growing cultural diversity, due to large numbers of international students together with domestic students of diverse backgrounds. The literature indicates that while this should provide an opportunity for cross-cultural mixing and intercultural learning, more often than not these opportunities are not embraced. This paper explores initial results of a study of orientations to cross cultural interaction and learning among first year students starting university. The findings indicate some ambivalence among the students, including a general positivity towards the idea of interaction, but reticence to make personal efforts to make the most of these opportunities.

Keywords: cultural diversity, tertiary education, internationalisation, cross cultural interaction.

Australia has the world’s second most internationalised higher education system in the world – 25% of students come from overseas, joining an already diverse domestic student population (over 40% of Australia’s population were born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas). As well as the mainstream Australian population, campuses are shared by students from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds including Chinese, Indian, Vietnamese, Malaysian, Singaporean, Indonesian, Saudi Arabian, and from various
European and other Western nations such as Canada and the US. Local students from what are known as the ‘new communities’ derived from refugee intakes from Africa, the Middle East and Asia are also joining the already diverse student populations. This creates unique opportunities for intercultural interaction, and the development of intercultural confidence. Much is known about the challenges of cross-cultural contact but less is known about how cultural diversity can be used productively, particularly to enhance learning outcomes.

**Background**

The challenges of cultural diversity in higher education are well documented (Asmar, 2005; Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009). Yet the benefits of cross cultural learning are also clear. In broad terms students should develop awareness of the cultural construction of knowledge and alternate knowledges, as well as alternate learning styles, through working with students from different cultural backgrounds. They will also benefit from opportunities to counter prejudices and stereotypes; develop intercultural competence and confidence, providing a useful form of social and cultural capital (relevant generally and professionally); and the fostering of an ‘international outlook’ (Montgomery, 2009). These are important in a global context where the cosmopolitan identity is increasingly salient (Kendall et al, 2009; Skrbis and Woodward, 2007).

Intercultural learning in higher education environments is best facilitated through collaborative learning activities using mixed groups (e.g. Dillenbourg, 1999; Dunstan, 2003; Ryan & Hellmundt, 2005). However academic and time pressures, identity and communication issues, cultural-emotional connectedness, negative stereotypes, ethnocentrism and apathy, inhibit cross cultural interactions and therefore learning opportunities (eg Ippolito, 2007; Leung, 2001; Oetzel, 2001; Kimmel & Volet, 2009; Ujitani & Volet, 2008; Smart, Volet & Ang, 2000; Volet & Ang 1998). Students prefer homogeneity in both learning and social environments; and there is a decline in students’ attitudes towards mixed group projects over time (Summers & Volet, 2008). In-group bias is also widely present in students’ informal, out-of-class, social activities, even when
there have been opportunities for interactions as part of their university studies – i.e. on-campus mixing does not result in off-campus mixing (Kimmel and Volet, 2010). The result is a lack of intercultural interactions among culturally diverse student groups, and a sense of isolation, loneliness and exclusion, particularly among international students (Sawir et al., 2008).

The current paper reports preliminary findings from an ARC Discovery funded research program (DP0986901, undertaken with Simone Volet) that seeks to examine the potential of diversity, specifically the process by which intercultural interactions and confidence emerge and can be fostered, rather than adding to the literature on how that process is inhibited. The project is collecting data on the process by which intercultural confidence emerges in diverse learning communities and the significance of both formal and informal contexts for intercultural development. It has an ‘action’ orientation, including developing learning activities embedded within students’ professional study programs in preparation for cultural dimensions of work.

The study uses a number of conceptual tools. One is the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS) (Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman, 2003). This well studied model sees positive intercultural interactions as more likely to occur between people at a ‘higher’ stage of development of intercultural competence, who take an ethno-relative stance, compared to those at a ‘lower’ stage, who take an ethnocentric orientation. While the linear sequential assumption of the model may be challenged, the notion of a developmental process is a useful tool to assist understanding of the movement towards more positive orientations. It is likely students will orient towards opportunities for intercultural interactions in formal and informal environments in different ways depending on a number of influencing factors, including previous experience, perceptions of cost and benefit, and political climate. We have also incorporated aspects of the multicultural personality questionnaire (MPQ) (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhouwen 2000, 2001) that measures five dimensions relevant to positive intercultural interactions: cultural empathy, open mindedness, social initiatives, emotional stability and flexibility.
We also develop the notion of intercultural confidence. For intercultural learning opportunities to yield positive outcomes, students must develop a sense of intercultural confidence, rather than simply competence – students must feel confident in their ability to negotiate across cultural diversity. This is part of a process of ‘tertiary socialisation’ (as distinct from primary and secondary) according to Alred and Byram (2002) which involves the development of both affective capacity and cognitive skills which constitute a form of cultural capital that is particularly useful not just in everyday life but in professional situations that call for intercultural interaction.

Alred and Byram identify a number of preconditions and skills necessary for the development of this sense of confidence: attitudes that relativise the self and value the other, thus decentring one’s own behaviours, beliefs and values; knowledge of one’s own and other’s behaviours, beliefs and values, and of the perceptions of each of these by the other; skills of interpreting and relating the things one encounters based on existing knowledge and attitudes, of discovering new behaviours, beliefs and values, and of interacting based on other preconditions and skills. They also point out that within an educational setting, it requires the teacher to develop ‘critical cultural awareness’. Intercultural confidence relates to another measure, cultural intelligence (Earley 2002), which focuses on motivation to engage with new cultures and provide culturally appropriate response in a new environment. This reflects one’s confidence in managing uncertainties in cross cultural interactions, and goes to both resilience and commitment – what we might call ‘stick-to-ateness’. It is likely this sense of confidence is a feature of those holding a more ‘cosmopolitan’ outlook.

Each of these conceptual tools has been incorporated into the design of the research instruments, and will feature in the interventions developed to assist academics teaching such students to better exploit the benefits of culturally diverse campuses. However for this paper the focus is on providing preliminary results on identity and orientations to cultural understanding and cross cultural interactions.
Results

The first stage of data collection (February 2010) focussed on first year students in their first weeks of enrolment. Second and subsequent stages will determine how students’ perceptions and expectations change over time. The preliminary data discussed in this paper come from a sample of 745 such students drawn from first year Business, Community Development, Media Culture Communication, Engineering, Environment Science; computing; IT; Education; Nursing; and learning support classes, at a single ‘red brick’ university. Classes surveyed were selected to provide a range of sciences and arts; to focus on courses that have larger proportions of ‘local diverse’ and international students; and to focus on students engaged in courses with a clear career pathway into a profession. The questionnaire explored dimensions of students entry profile including history of intercultural interactions; perceived personal social and cultural identity; sense of interdependence; disposition towards cross-cultural experiences; expectations of peer interactions in class/outside class in first semester; goals; intercultural confidence; conceptions of learning; and orientations to group work. Fifty interviews were also undertaken but that data is not discussed here.
Table 1: Orientations to cultural understanding and interaction (n=745; data expressed in percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not very</th>
<th>Very</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How important is it for you to interact with other students outside class?</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your opinion, how important is cultural understanding in your course of study?</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your opinion, how important is cultural understanding for effective professional practice in your future career?</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How important is it to you to interact with people with cultural backgrounds different from your own?</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How confident are you in interacting with people with cultural backgrounds different from your own?</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging students from diverse backgrounds to mix for group learning activities is an excellent idea.</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers should <em>systematically</em> mix students from different cultural backgrounds for group learning activities</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>51.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 indicates that while cultural understanding is very important to students in both their study and professional practice, interacting with those who are culturally different is somewhat less important. Students’ levels of confidence in their ability to interact across cultures are reasonably high, indicating that they feel capable of studying and mixing with others in a diverse environment. In terms of ensuring diversity by mixing students for learning activities, students overwhelmingly see this as a positive thing, but are more ambivalent about being obliged to work in mixed groups.
Students were also asked: *How often do you think you will try to mix with students with cultural backgrounds different from your own for the following activities?* The results (see Table 2) form a sort of ‘Bogardus Social Distance Scale’ for campus environments.

**Table 2: Orientations to cross-cultural mixing in different environments** (n=745; data expressed in percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Not very</th>
<th>Very</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group assignments when students can form their own group</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>53.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying outside class (informal study groups)</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>44.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over coffee or lunch on campus</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>45.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To go out, e.g. at the movies, other social activities</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To share accommodation</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The question asked students about the degree to which they actively seek out opportunities for interaction, and the results indicate a steady decrease in such seeking as we move from in-class mixing to more informal opportunities such as informal study, on-campus socialising, off-campus socialising and sharing accommodation. Thus while students see interacting with those who are culturally different from them as relatively important, they will not go out of their way to pursue such opportunities, particularly in informal situations.

We also asked all students, despite their background, how important their cultural identity is to them. The results are outlined in Table 3.
Table 3: Importance of cultural identity (n=745; data expressed in percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How important is your cultural identity to you?</th>
<th>Not very</th>
<th>Very</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>30.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Culturally identity seems important for many students, with only a third selecting the lower two points on a four point scale, and a third selecting each of the two positive options. We have not yet analysed these results in relation to the students’ actual self-chosen identity. However, it is interesting to consider the variety of responses received to the open-ended question inviting students to identify their ‘cultural identity/ies’. We received many interesting responses (answers quoted verbatim). Some were standard, identifying country of origin such as: *Indonesian; Nigerian; Lebanese* etc. Others were hybrid: *English, Sth African and Australian; Australian and Indian; Russian/Australian; Australian born in India; Malaysian Chinese*. Some used broader categories: *Anglo Saxon; Asian; Oceanic*. But a large number used complex mixed categories or extended explanations to refer to their ‘cultural’ identities, as the following list attests.

2nd gen Australia; Anglo-Celtic; working class; female; gen x
Australian but born Italian - strong links Sth Italy traditions (Sicilian and Calabrese)
Australian exposed to other cultures
I’m Australian but have no real cultural identity besides having a BBQ with friends
Still deciding
Citizen of the world
Confused
More than Ceylonese, which is Sri Lankan Indian, I like to believe that being born and brought up in a multicultural society has led me to being less ignorant about diff societies and cultures
PS3 Fanboy
Westernised Bangladeshi, global citizenship, Singaporean
White, middle class, male, gay, with a disability

Country scone kids

Asian with large western influence, whilst maintaining Asian values

While we have not yet analysed the ways in which these identities (which include aspects of racial, cultural, gendered, class, sexuality, and other dimensions) may affect orientation to intercultural interactions, it is likely that identity, often taken for granted in the literature and study designs for research on cross cultural interactions, is fundamental to how students relate to each other, and present themselves. Students clearly recognise the complexity of ethnic identity. These dimensions have been followed up in a series of interviews allowing students the opportunity to talk about their identities and how they see these as related to their orientation to intercultural interactions on and off campus.

Conclusion

Students’ willingness to engage with cultural diversity as part of their university studies is vital in countries with diverse populations such as Australia. Such experiences may influence their success in the workplace, especially in professional occupations that demand well developed communication and interpersonal skills to deal with culturally diverse clients. But such skills are also vital in terms of making a positive contribution to building an inclusive society. The preliminary data outlined above suggests that first year students hold generally positive orientations to diversity, but that they are less willing to make actual efforts to use the opportunities provided by the diverse campuses of which they are a part. This reflects studies of Australians’ orientations to diversity generally (Goot and Watson, 2005; Skrbis and Woodward, 2007) which demonstrate a rather ambivalent orientation to engagement with cultural diversity. Cultural diversity is seen as positive in an abstract and somewhat disengaged sense, but actual opportunities to take advantage of the diversity offered by university campuses are not taken up. Without further research (currently under way) into orientations to and processes of engagement with diversity, it is difficult to explain why this is so. Candidate answers include feelings of inadequacy, previous negative experiences of mixing, lack of interest, comfort with the
familiarity of the culturally similar, lack of shared interests, racism and so on. On the other hand, it is likely that certain students will have a more cosmopolitan orientation to engagement with those seen as culturally different – in Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman’s (2003) terms, those who are more interculturally competent. Preliminary analysis of qualitative data from the project indicates this effect, and current analysis is focusing on these students’ sense of identity (often hybrid), previous experiences of cross cultural interaction (often through travel) and possible class effects. It seems clear that some students bring to their cross cultural interaction a level of intercultural confidence derived from processes involving tertiary socialization (Alred and Byram, 2002) leading to cultural intelligence (Earley 2002) that sees some students pursue opportunities for interactions beyond the somewhat superficial ones encountered in classrooms, as well as to see classroom opportunities in a more positive light than the majority. It is these students who are more likely to take up opportunities to engage with ‘everyday multiculturalism’ (Wise and Velayuthum, 2009) in positive ways, and it is these students and their orientations and experiences we wish to explore in more depth.

It is clear that universities have both a significant opportunity and a number of challenges ahead in terms of encouraging students to make the most of the diversity available on (and off) their campuses. This research may provide some insight into not only into how to improve uptake of these opportunities, but also the factors that influence cross cultural interaction more generally.

References


