Developing Social and Cultural Diversity as a Pedagogical Resource

Glenda Ballantyne
Sociology
Swinburne University of Technology
gballantyne@swin.edu.au

Abstract:
This paper reports on a project, funded by the Higher Education Equity Program at La Trobe University in 2005, which sought to develop ways of transforming the cultural diversity that is often an obstacle to full participation in the intellectual dialogue of the social sciences into a pedagogical resource that could be used positively to enhance students’ ability to engage with the discipline. The paper situates the project in its socio-historical context, evaluates each of the strategies, draws some general conclusions and makes specific recommendations. The focus on concrete cultural traditions was received enthusiastically by students, because it spoke to their experiences and engaged them in the broader dialogue. Making the issue of cultural diversity a central point of reference provided a welcome experience of inter-cultural communication and a rich source of knowledge for the student body generally. Giving voice to a range of social and cultural experiences generated multiple perspectives, fostered engagement with the curriculum, and provided deeper insight into course content. The most culturally marginal students reported feeling ‘heard’ and ‘recognized’ in a way not encountered elsewhere at school or university, and repeatedly and forcefully indicate that this recognition greatly enhanced their learning experience.

Background
Over the past few decades, global social, cultural and political developments have transformed the circumstances in which we teach. The trends towards privatization and commodification of education have been well documented, but equally significant is the transformation of the student body that has been brought about by the postwar immigration program, the ‘massification’ of tertiary education, and the contemporary globalization of education. These developments have combined to present us with
classrooms comprised of ever larger numbers of students, many of whom are second-generation migrants and/or first-generation tertiary students.

Significant numbers of these students are struggling to make the transition to university learning and life, at least in part because the social and cultural ‘diversity’ they embody is experienced as an obstacle to learning. ‘First generation’ tertiary students often experience the absence of ‘cultural capital’ acquired through tertiary-educated parents as an unnamed but significant obstacle to full participation, and students from ethnic minorities are often not familiar with cultural assumptions that are embedded in curriculum content and discussion, but rarely explicitly addressed.

At the same time, however, this diverse student body is bringing into the classroom a wealth of knowledge of social and cultural milieus which lends itself to a number of important pedagogical objectives. Appropriately elicited, this knowledge can foster the awareness of culturally and socially diverse social institutions and practices, heighten student engagement with the curriculum, and provide an ‘in-built’ experience of intercultural communication.

With these considerations in mind, funding was sought from the Higher Education Equity Program at La Trobe University to develop and trial specific teaching and learning strategies for utilising the social and cultural diversity that is often experienced as a barrier to learning as a pedagogical resource. The project was undertaken in conjunction with a second and third year sociology subject in the sociology program of the School of Social Sciences, and its primary locus was a designated tutorial open to students from all equity groups (disability, low socio-economic background, non-English-speaking background and rural and isolated areas).

Methodology

There is widespread agreement around the pedagogical value of making cultural diversity an explicit theme in contemporary teaching contexts (Ramsey 2000; McLoughlin 2001; Terenzini et al 2001; Keating and Byles 1991; Day and Glick 2000; Hurtado et al 2000). There is also a broad convergence around the aims and objectives of ‘multicultural teaching’. Ramsey (2000) draws on Schuster and Van Dyne’s (1985) delineation of key components of multicultural education, which
include incorporating students’ experience, and paying attention to learning processes. Mcloughlin (2001) stresses inclusivity and alignment between curriculum and assessment, along with collaborative approaches. Both also share a ‘strengths-based’ rather than ‘deficits-based’ perspective on cultural diversity. However, this literature spans a wide range of disciplines (Day and Glick 2000; Keating and Byles 1991), and many of the concrete strategies identified reflect their specific pedagogical contexts (structured experiential exercises are relevant in Ramsey’s field of professional counselling, and web-based strategies are the focus of McLoughlin’s concern with distance education).

The strategies trialled in this project were shaped by immediate teaching challenges (the presence of a cohort of struggling NESB students in the sociology program), and their development was based on the teaching experience of the staff members involved. In the case of the author, reflection on this experience was informed by a hermeneutical conception of culture, learning and identity influenced by Paul Ricoeur (1992), which broadly overlaps with constructivist pedagogies and multifaceted conceptions of cultural identity like those of Ramsey (2000). On the basis of immediate past experience (in a theory-based subject) three widely accepted but only intermittently deployed teaching practices were considered most relevant. These were:

(i) relating the ideas, concepts, perspectives and subject matter of the subject to the worlds already encountered by the students

(ii) extensive and intensive discussion of the intellectual content of written assessment, with attention to implicit cultural and intellectual assumptions and specific historical experiences

(iii) close textual analysis of course materials, with attention to implicit cultural and intellectual assumptions and specific historical experiences

In the context of the research-oriented subject to which the project was attached, however, the first two quickly emerged as the most relevant, and were made the principle organising principles around which the tutorial was organised. The third strategy was therefore not systematically trialled, and its relevance to more theoretically-oriented subjects remains to be assessed.

In the first week of semester, questionnaires were administered to all students enrolled in the subject to ascertain details of social and cultural background, as well as
students’ self-assessment of their adjustment to university study. Thirteen interested students who met the criteria for inclusion of at least one of the ‘equity groups’.

Once selected, a focus group was conducted to elicit the students’ cultural, social and family backgrounds, their previous educational experience, and their adjustment to the intellectual and social demands of tertiary education. This discussion had a research and a pedagogical function, providing both data on the expectations and problems of the students, and a concrete means of implementing the strategy of making cultural difference an explicit theme. The participants were asked to talk about their social, cultural and religious backgrounds, with a particular focus on their own and their parents’ educational achievements and aspirations. The teaching staff initiated the process in order to provide a model (and in particular, a sociological framework and vocabulary) that the students could draw upon. All students participated happily and enthusiastically. The group then met weekly in an extended tutorial format of 90 rather than 60 minutes, and at the conclusion of the teaching period, a second focus group and written evaluations were used to ascertain the students’ experience of the project.

The Participants

The range of cultural backgrounds represented was wide and encompassed a complex mix of social, ethnic and religious identifications. Six were second-generation Turkish migrants, with strong Muslim identifications. A Somalian student shared a religion with the Turkish students but, growing up in Canberra with a professional parent working for the UN, not their cultural and social experiences. The four students who identified as Anglo Celtic expressed little religious affiliation. Three students of Vietnamese, Croatian, and Italian background (all second-generation migrants) expressed varying but notable interest in their (Christian) religious heritage.

Despite the multidirectionality of this cultural diversity, one question of cultural difference unmistakably predominated. This was the division between Muslims and non-Muslims, in this case all Christians, but including students of both European and Asian descent. The cultural differences involved were of considerable interest to both sides, although in an asymmetrical fashion. The Turkish students greatly appreciate the opportunity to give an account of their religion and culture, and the non-Turkish students greatly appreciated the opportunity to ask questions of them. There was
however, no parallel presentation of or interest in the content of non-Muslim cultural identities.

The social backgrounds of the group were diverse in terms of public/private schooling and parental occupation, but most were ‘first-generation’ tertiary students. The sole male student transferred out of the group after a few weeks, uncomfortable with the gender imbalance.

Findings

(i) Relating the ideas, concepts, perspectives and subject matter of the subject to the worlds already encountered by the students is a widely used pedagogical strategy. However, it takes on new dimensions in multicultural contexts, where a common experience cannot be assumed, and the worlds students have encountered may be diverse. In such a context, the ability to connect the curriculum to familiar worlds can depend upon knowledge of a wide range of worlds. In the context of intrinsically transient tutorials, the only feasible way such knowledge can be gained is directly from the participants in each particular group. A general idea of the range of social and cultural backgrounds of the participants was gained through the initial focus group, which was explicitly and systematically dedicated to canvassing the social and cultural backgrounds of the students. This set the tone and the agenda for the semester, and facilitated the ongoing exploration of the diverse social and cultural milieus represented by the students.

This strategy was very effective from a pedagogical point of view, and an oft-cited source of student satisfaction. This was perhaps best summed up by the student who noted that ‘this tutorial was what I imagined tutorials would be like.’ From a teaching perspective, the variety of social and cultural experiences of the students could be deployed to foster two pedagogical objectives in particular. Firstly, it provided a concrete demonstration of the central premise of the sociological perspective, in so far as particular social institutions and patterns of behaviour were ‘denaturalised’ and shown to be ‘social constructions’. Secondly, it provided a broad perspective on empirical variations that can be identified in relation to specific institutions and practices.

At the same time, the explicit thematization of cultural differences within the group observably heightened student engagement with the subject, and facilitated learning.
As comments from both the focus group and written evaluations show, from the students’ perspective, this strategy was beneficial on a number of levels. Firstly, students responded very positively to the opportunity to relate the issues of the subject to their own lives, and indicated that this process enhanced their grasp of key concepts and core curriculum. As one student put it, ‘you can engage more with the topic if you can relate it to your own life.’

Secondly, directly addressing the issue of cultural diversity provided a welcome experience of inter-cultural communication and knowledge for all students, which fostered their engagement with the curriculum through the multicultural perspective it generated. A second student reported that ‘hearing about other people’s lives and culture made me have a different view to what I might have had, so was an education.’

Thirdly, those students who can be considered to be the most culturally marginal reported feeling ‘heard’ and ‘recognized’ in a way not encountered elsewhere at school or university and this greatly enhanced their learning experience. One of the Turkish students noted that ‘in other tutorials we are considered aliens,’ and they all repeatedly voiced their satisfaction with the way in which their cultural specificity was not simply tolerated, but concretely recognised through ongoing discussion. This experience of recognition occurred even though the non-Muslims questioned the Muslim’s evaluations and interpretations of their own, and mainstream Australian or Western, values.

Finally, the strategy of generating discussion around social and cultural backgrounds generated close connections among students which also contributed significantly to their learning experience. In the present socio-political context, the experience of university is often of unsupported and isolated learning, and while this increasingly an issue for all students, for those with least ‘cultural capital’, it can constitute a more acute problem. The strong student relationships generated by the initial focus group were highly appreciated, and improved students’ satisfaction levels to a degree which suggests that this strategy would be equally beneficial in the absence of cultural diversity. The strong personal ties that were generated in the group was the background to the comment that’ the environment made it easy to talk.’
(ii) Discussion of the intellectual content of written assessment is also a standard teaching practice, but more time than normal was devoted to it in the project, and particular attention was paid to implicit cultural and intellectual assumptions and references to specific historical experiences within its design and content. A few weeks into the course, we began discussing the essay topics, and spent some time nearly every week reviewing the content, and on some occasions, the technical requirements of their written assessment. This did not pose a problem in terms of going outside of the subject matter of the course, but it does have the potential to skew the balance within the subject material where the assessment consists of assignments on a selection of topics rather than an attempt to gauge students’ knowledge of the curriculum as a whole, for example through exams. This problem is minimized, however, when the range of topics covers a broad part of the curriculum, and is dealt with systematically in the tutorial. Discussion of the topics provided an opportunity for discussion of subject material central to the course, and exposed students to discussion of content outside of their own area of research/work.

This strategy met with considerable favour by the students, and proved to be an effective response to the problems of transition experienced by many ‘first generation’ tertiary students. A common theme was that the more detailed discussion of assessment tasks was more like the supportive learning and teaching practices of their secondary education. One participant noted that ‘other subjects just hand out essay topics. You feel like you’re dumped in the middle of the ocean and have to swim.’ Another student felt that ‘we’re all at different stages, but that was accommodated.’

**Impact on student ‘performance’**

These strategies unequivocally enhanced students’ subjective learning experience, as is clearly documented by student feedback questionnaires and concluding focus group. The impact on student performance, however, is more difficult to assess. To measure this impact in a meaningful way would require a much larger study, but some tentative impressions can be offered on the basis of this limited experience.

The impact of student performance can be analysed in terms of retention rates and grades. In the first case, although the sample was small, it is worth noting that all students completed the subject. Coupled with the reported high levels of satisfaction, this suggests that these strategies may play a role in protecting those most at risk of
dropping out. In the second case, while the impact on grades is extremely difficult to measure, and would remain so even in a larger scale study, my impression is that the most likely impact of these strategies would be in reducing the number of students who fail, and generating some movement from D to C grade.

**Difficulties**

The most important limitation of the study, apart from its small scale, was that the effectiveness of the strategies was undoubtedly enhanced by the small (by contemporary standards) size of the tutorial in which they were trialled, confirming other findings that smaller class sizes are conducive to better learning outcomes (Hurtado et al 2002). The size of the tutorial was mentioned by a number of students as an important factor in the enhanced learning experience, with one noting that ‘class size made it less intimidating.’ Evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategies in larger tutorials is therefore called for. It can be noted, however, that the size (up to 25) of tutorials with which we are now routinely confronted is a significant factor in the sense of isolation that is a major source of student dissatisfaction, and it is precisely these classes which are in need of teaching strategies which will increase students engagement with each other, with staff, and ultimately with the subject matter of their courses.

**Conclusions**

This project was undertaken on a very small scale, and in connection with only one social science subject. The exceptionally positive response of the students suggested, however, that with appropriate adaptation, these strategies could improve the learning experience of students across the humanities and social sciences. However, while the strategies may require adjustments to suit particular contexts, one general pedagogical principle of particular importance and wide relevance emerged strongly from the study.

This principle is that ‘cultural difference’ should where possible form, if not a central point of reference, at least a permanent background point of reference for the subject matter of the humanities and social sciences. The implementation of such a principle would have two closely related pedagogical advantages. From a teaching perspective, approaching the humanities and social sciences in a framework that recognizes the diversity of cultural experience provides a broader understanding of subject matter.
Clearly, there will be many areas for which this would be either artificial or cumbersome, or quite legitimately outside the area of expertise of teaching staff. At a minimum, however, the specificity of the Western experience can be acknowledged, and other particular experiences can be elicited as much as possible from students. From a learning point of view, this approach fosters a more engaged learning experience. Explicit discussion of the particular social and cultural backgrounds of students enhances deep level rather than surface level learning by connecting the subject material to students own experiences, and ameliorates the isolation that characterizes many students' experience of university by fostering relationships between students.

Endnotes

1 This project was undertaken in conjunction with Assoc. Professor Kereen Reiger, and was attached to her course Families and Change. I would like to acknowledge her contribution to the conception and execution of the project, but take full responsibility for any deficiencies in the analysis of it provided here. I developed the strategies, conducted the tutorial in which they were trialled and wrote the report on which this paper is based.

2 I would like to thank the anonymous referee who provided a number of relevant references.

References


