



Teacher Awareness: From engaging with diversity to learning for diversity

Key Words

diversity, intercultural interaction, cultural learning,

Abstract

Universities in Australia are becoming increasingly diverse, with students coming from culturally and linguistically varied backgrounds. As a result, there is a focus on diversity and inclusivity in higher education, and the development of culturally competent students. Despite general agreement among key stakeholders that there is now an imperative for universities to educate students for a globalised work environment and make them 'global citizens', strategies aimed at achieving this are often ill-defined and intangible in practice (Arkoudis et al. 2012). What does it mean to engage with diversity and develop culturally competent students? I believe this is an area that needs to be better understood, and my interest is in how this can be achieved in practice. The focus of my Doctor of Education thesis is on understanding teacher perceptions of cultural diversity, factors affording or inhibiting engaging with diversity in the classroom, and implications of this for teaching and learning. Therefore, the focus is on teaching and learning in relation to intercultural interaction in the classroom and how perceptions can enhance or challenge engagement with diversity. This paper will present a model of learning that has been developed from the spectrum of views that emerged from this research, and my own reflections thereon. I theorise, through this model of learning, that teacher awareness is central to cultural learning. And I would argue that ALL practitioners should play a critical role in developing this awareness in teachers and students, and in enhancing cultural learning outcomes. Classroom engagement centres on interacting with others and developing relationships. This engagement is dependent on numerous factors and expectations. Learning in the classroom is dynamic. It is not a static process. It involves the development of relationships that engage the participant in both cognitive and affective interactions. The development of cultural competence is part of a multidimensional cultural and self learning process. Based on the findings of my research and literature on engaging diversity in the classroom, a framework of four principles of learning has been identified. These principles are learning about diversity, learning from diversity, learning through diversity and learning for diversity. It is argued that the four principles of learning are interrelated. The second, third and fourth principles subsume previous ones through different points of engagement. They move from an externally focused process to an internal consideration of values and an awareness of how cultural values frame behaviour. Knowing that cultural influences guide and shape identity, including one's own identity, allows for acceptance that there are other ways of seeing (Garcia 2011). This understanding is extended in the final principle, learning for diversity. It is theorised that learning for diversity enables inclusion by a shifting of power. Learning for diversity reframes cultural learning by moving the focus from external cultural differences to internal values and how they affect relationships. In doing so the teacher's values are no longer considered the normative authority of learning; a wider range of values is reconstructed and viewed as part of classroom diversity, which is dynamic and evolving.

References

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