Promoting Effective Learning in a Multicultural Classroom.

Abstract

Cultural diversity in society, the workplace and classrooms in Australia is a fact of life. The multi-cultural classroom provides an opportunity for students from different cultures to bring their enormous range of experiences, knowledge, perspectives and insights to the learning – if the process is enabled. This is not always easy to do.

This paper outlines part of a one year project which will draw on the literature, interviews with teaching staff and focus groups of ‘best practice’ teachers, to present some practical strategies for the effective teaching of business disciplines. The student perspective will be incorporated in the next stage of the project. A number of assumptions underpin the research and the development of this paper.

- Australian classes use Western teaching and learning strategies that focus on critical analysis, oral discussion, problem solving and the possibility of multiple solutions.
- The classes are made up of students from a wide number of cultures, including English speaking Australians.
- Many of the students have a language other than English as their mother tongue.
- Organisations around the world, and therefore students, work in increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse work places and many will operate internationally. The capacity to work with people who are different is important for all students to learn.

"You learn from foreigners that there is more than one path to a goal. Effective wealth creation demands that we use all the paths available to us “ (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993:16, cited in Sinclair and Wilson 1999:27)

- Teaching practices that assist the learning of international students will in fact be of benefit to all students.

The paper identifies a number of issues related to effective teaching in multi cultural business classrooms at universities, it addresses the potential barriers to effective learning, the challenges to teachers and offers a range of strategies that have been demonstrated to improve teaching and learning in this context and outlines the processes for building on current knowledge to improve the quality of teaching in multicultural classrooms.

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Promoting Effective Learning in a Multicultural Classroom.
Introduction

There are an increasing number of international students on business programs in Australia. The MBA, and the Faculty of Business at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) is no exception; and these students are coming from an increasingly diverse range of countries. For many of these students, their first language is other than English. Their experience of tertiary education is often significantly different from that which they encounter at QUT. This raises challenges for teachers who are faced with sizeable classes made up of a combination of domestic and international students. Since semester 2 1999, 530 international students have studied in the Brisbane Graduate School of Business (BGSB). In addition there are 1300 post-graduate international students in other programs in the Faculty of Business. (total students numbers on the MBA program at any one time are around 800). Indications are that this cohort will continue to increase in both size and diversity.

This phenomenon is not unique to Australia. Tertiary education around the world is becoming ‘internationalised’ that is, there is an increasing mix of domestic and international students in classes. Many Western countries including the United States, The United Kingdom, France, Germany and South Africa, as well as Australia, provide education for foreign students. ‘Foreign’ education is big business. Education is the fifth largest services export in the United States and the third largest in Australia. (Marginson 2002). In 2000 there were over 100,000 foreign students studying at Australian universities. More than two thirds of all international graduates are in business and IT. In vocational master’s programs in business one half of the students are foreign.

Despite this, and the fact that Australia is itself an extremely culturally diverse community, Australian higher education remains essentially mono-cultural in form and Anglo American in content. The teaching and learning implications of such a large, very diverse international student population has yet to be addressed at most institutions of higher education.

These international students may want to understand the ‘Western’ way of doing things, but may not be familiar or comfortable with, the processes used to facilitate learning. (Pincas 2001) MBA classrooms traditionally use a range of Western teaching and learning strategies that focus on critical analysis, oral discussion, problem solving and the possibility of multiple solutions using case studies and discussion groups that require active participation by the students, which many international students find unfamiliar. These students come with their own expectations arising from the educational practices of their communities. Their potential lack of participation in classroom activities puts constraints on classroom interaction and learning. It also means that nothing that they have to teach about their way of doing things, is learned.

The potential benefits of diversity are many. Not only do international students bring significant revenue to the university but they provide an opportunity for intercultural learning, for a sharing of knowledge and perspectives that could be so important for success in today’s global business environment. Yet research suggests that cultural engagement is largely unidirectional – Australian students expect international students to adjust to them, not vica versa. (cited in Marginson 2002). An important question
then arises, how do the facilitators of learning, the teachers, lecturers and tutors ensure effective teaching and learning in such a complex environment?

In classrooms with students from Europe, North and South America, Asia, India and Australia the potential for intercultural understanding and skills development is enormous. But it won’t happen without assistance. Most international students spend most of their time with other students who speak their language or who come from a similar cultural background. Australians are not different in this respect. Therefore many international students who come to study in Australia, learn about Australian business practices in the classroom but gain no practical experience of what Australian business, or in fact Australians, are like.

All of these factors impact on providing effective learning experiences to all students in culturally diverse classrooms.

The project
Early discussion with staff in the Brisbane Graduate School of Business led to the identification of a number of perceived barriers to learning and strategies to overcome these barriers and improve learning outcomes, particularly for international students. These early discussion provided the foundation for a year long fellowship, funded by QUT, to explore these issues further and develop strategies to improve the support to international students and the internationalisation of the curriculum throughout the Faculty of Business

This fellowship aimed to:

1. Develop a better understanding of the issues of teaching and learning in diverse classrooms at QUT from the perspective of both teaching staff and students.
2. Identify best practice and effective strategies in facilitating positive learning outcomes for international students, at QUT, and around the world.
3. Develop resources that illustrate ‘best practice’ in teaching post-graduate classes that are a mix of domestic and international students.
4. Provide learning opportunities for staff that promote more effective teaching and learning in diverse classrooms
5. Disseminate outcomes through publications and workshops.

This paper looks at the issues from the ‘best practice’ perspective and offers ideas from the staff and the literature to improve the teaching and learning in culturally diverse classrooms.

Methods
The approach taken was largely inductive, gathering as much evidence as possible about the topic, with nothing ruled out, using individual interviews and focus groups. Through the inductive process, it is possible to identify issues that have not previously been identified in the existing literature. The interviews of staff started with a general formulation of the potential issues gained from previous experience and the literature, but this is general in nature, and did not start with a theory or an hypothesis. As Miles
and Huberman (1984) comments “any researcher, no matter how unstructured or inductive, comes to fieldwork with some orienting ideas, foci and tools.” (Page 27).

Semi-structured interviews with teaching staff who have involvement with international students were conducted. The fairly relaxed conversational nature of the interviews enabled whatever issues were raised, to be explored. However, the interviews did have some of the characteristics of ethnographic interviews in that the interviewee was informed of the purpose of the interview and the interviewer had control of the interview, asking questions and probing the person’s responses. (Potter, page 96).

The purpose was to get an idea of the nature of the issues teachers saw as confronting international students and the teaching strategies/techniques they have found the most helpful. The staff were asked to identify what they considered to be the critical issues for effective teaching and learning in their classrooms and the strategies they have found most effective in delivering good learning outcomes.

A random sample of QUT Faculty of Business was selected and contacted with the support of the Associate Dean. In addition a focus group of ‘interested’ teachers was conducted, who shared their ideas about the issues and their strategies for enhancing teaching and learning. The 4 teachers in the focus group came from the Schools of International Business and the Brisbane Graduate School of Business. They were self selecting in that they accepted an invitation that was sent to a number of ‘recommended’ teachers to share their perceptions and strategies.

**Nature of the respondents.**

The sample proved to be very diverse and reflected the diversity of the teaching staff in the Faculty of Business. Twelve of the respondents were full-time, 3 casual. All but 1 teach undergraduate students, 8 also teach post graduate students. One teaches post-graduate only. The length of experience of respondents varied considerably from 1 to 33 years. The range of disciplines taught was also very diverse and included: marketing, advertising, organisational behaviour, entrepreneurship, internet promotions, international business, cross cultural communication, project management, strategic management, economics, business law, ethics, accounting, banking, finance, management. This suggests that the staff are teaching across very diverse disciplines, with the different issues raised by both quantitative and ‘human focused’ disciplines.

The range of class sizes common in the Faculty was also reflected. Most respondents operated in both the large lecture scenario with classes of 100-500 and the smaller tutorial classes of between 20-25. Post-graduate classes ranged from 10- 40 students.

The percentage of international students in the classes varied from 10% to as much as 75%. Two respondents also taught classes that were exclusively international. Most of the classes appear to have between 25% and 40% international students.

**Issues Raised by the presence of international students**

The staff interviewed identified a range of issues that need to be addressed for effective teaching and learning to occur. All issues are not present in all situations but there was considerable similarities in what teachers saw to be the issues.

The issues identified by the respondents included:
Personal issues created by the fact that they were far from familiar environments such a home sickness, culture shock and associated grief and stress created by family expectations.

Language issues, which were very diverse and included such factors as: language barriers, very low English language ability for a minority, the broad range of discipline specific language/concepts that is often difficult to grasp. These language-related issues raised particular challenges for teachers including: the choice of words becomes important particularly the use of colloquial language, pace needs to be slower and it is often difficult to know whether the problem is language or ability. Ability to write academic papers is often poor. Contextual issues are also important. Many of the subjects are taught within the Australian context. When the lecturer talks about democracy they mean the way democracy is in Australia. Also much of the language that is used is embedded in a local understanding of Australian history. A Cambodian student some years ago was sitting Junior English. One of her composition pieces referred to a horseshoe. She knew what a horseshoe was – what she didn’t know, and what affected her ability to understand, was that in English society a horseshoe is often used as a symbol of luck.

Teaching and learning issues. These appear to differ a little between undergraduate and post graduate levels – or at least appear more prevalent at undergraduate level. Undergraduates are often very quiet and tend not to listen to instructions, need to be checked individually. They need a lot more time than domestic students. Students want ‘templates’ which is inappropriate at particularly at post-graduate level. It can appear that they come to pass exams rather than learn. International students want face-to-face contact with lecturers rather than electronic/telephone contact and this is very time consuming.

There appears to be a lack of shared expectations as a result perhaps of cultural difference in past educational experiences. There can limited interaction/discussion in class. It is important to have integration between international and domestic students but this can be difficult and can lead to international students ‘free riding’ when in mixed groups with domestic students.

At post graduate level international students are a resource that can be drawn on to add professionally and culturally to the group. This is very important as we need to have global business education to develop global business skills. However, providing an international context can be seen to be criticizing other systems – causing offence. Previous experiences of learning for many international students leads them to not challenge the information they are given. They seek the ‘right answer’. They are trained as the recipients of learning rather than active learners. They want to be clear about what is expected, what is right. Often there is the expectation that the teacher will know the right answer and all they have to do is learn it from. They will accept ‘the teacher’s truth’. This is most apparent amongst students from Asian countries – but they are not the only students who exhibit dependent behaviour. Many students appear to be unfamiliar with the expectations of critical analysis, oral presentations, participation and debate.

Many cultures have a high level of respect for teachers. As a result they will not challenge. Even to ask questions can suggest that the lecturer is not being effective. This is most obvious amongst students from Asia but again these attitudes are shared by students from other countries. One Swiss student remarked that all through his
undergraduate degree he had very little contact with the academic staff, and when he did it was on a very formal footing. One of the greatest changes for him was the fact that here he was expected to address the lecturers by their first names and had an opportunity to meet them socially. Indian students have shared how difficult they found it to address their lecturers by their first names.

“if a lecturer does not answer a student’s question in class but asks the other students what they think, in my country we would think that teacher is either poorly qualified or lazy. But in Australia this way of not giving the answer … it is common in our class, even when the Professor is our teacher. (3rd year Thai Botany student) (Ballard & Clanchy 1997:1)

“the other students ask many questions and even argue with the professor. I could never do that, because I do not think that is right behaviour. I do not want to become like Australian students. (2nd year Thai undergraduate) (Ballard and Clanchy 1997:15)

Support issues were seen to be important in a number of areas. There is a need for students to support each other to reduce isolation. There is also a need for institutional support for students, both academically and socially. It is important that lecturers have access to information outlining what support services are available for international students.

Professional Development Issues. Lecturers need better education/training with regard to international students. This is essential if promises are to be delivered.

Group work. The integration of domestic with internationals students in groups is often difficult because of language difficulties and time pressures. The difficulties with tutorials and group work require lecturing /tutorial staff to have patience, firmness and understanding.

Individual ability. Some international students lack English language and the academic foundation to do well; they are not confident in using English and are not capable of the required academic level. They are not taught the required academic skills, they are expected to have them

Demands on lecturing/tutorial staff. The respondents identified a number of different demands placed on them when they have international students in their classes.

Lack of contextual knowledge can be a problem in both teaching and assessment, as it can make understanding more difficult. Students need longer for examinations. The presence of international students can also curb the amount of material that can be covered, the amount of participation and discussion that occurs. It can lead to being less specific in trying to globalise the issues. More repetition and explanation is required and there is a need to be careful with choice of words. It is often difficult to know at what level to pitch the class and this can lead to a tendency to teach to the lowest level of domestic student.

International students often appear to be passive learners and there is a need to choose learning resources and activities carefully and consider different types of assessment.
Strategies

So given what is known about learning and the issues that arise when this level of cultural diversity is present, the respondents were asked to identify what teaching and learning strategies they used to encourage participation and success on Western programs? Here are the strategies that they and the focus groups identified as being effective in culturally diverse classrooms. These need to be employed from the beginning of the class as the first few weeks are critical, as if international students fall behind they are unable to catch up.

Be aware of stereotyping. Avoid prejudging others’ knowledge or ability, even their language skills, on the basis of presumed difference – someone who looks Chinese may turn out to be third generation Australian. Recently a colleagues came into a day classes and commented that the class had divided down the middle with Asian on one side and Australians on the other. From an appearance point of view there was a difference. However, several of the ‘Asians’ were in fact Australian and most of the ‘Australians’ were from Europe.

Don’t be afraid to ask for help in pronouncing names, in finding out about how things are done in a different place. By asking you are indicating a genuine interest.

Make the material relevant. Most international students will use what they learn in their own countries so acknowledge this. Talk about their countries as an integral part of the discourse. Ask them to contribute local information. Draw in class examples from different countries and ask students to identify what, how, it occurs in their homeland.

Provide a context. When talking about government – clarify whether everyone has a shared understanding? If there is no time to explain the context, produce handouts with a glossary of terms (This may help some local students as well).

Make explicit the benefits of diversity. In encouraging participation, explain why cross cultural groups are useful for an activity. This is important for both international students and domestic students. Domestic students are often impatient with those who are slow with their English, and the reasons for them to participate should also be clearly spelled out. Be explicit as to why it is important for them to be able to participate. They are learning how it is done in the local culture. Ask them to share, wherever possible, how it is done in their culture. One lecturer in the Graduate School when he offers an example will ask for students to provide similar examples from at least two other countries.

Practice good communication in the classroom. Avoid acronyms, jargon or ‘local’ jokes. This will help all students. Practice active and genuine listening. Try not to be impatient and give those who try to express themselves an opportunity to complete what they have to say. Prepare written material that they can refer to can help them clarify that they understand the instructions. When taking feedback from the groups write the answers, conclusions, ideas on the board so that the students can see how the ideas given by members of the group interrelate. This also gives these answers credibility. There are students who do not recognise the importance/validity of their fellow students’ observations.
**Process instructions.** Explain very clearly why a participative activity is important, and exactly what the students are to do. Explain the process not just the outcome. If the activity is group discussion, give them clear questions to answer. The more specific about the requirements, particularly early on, the more self confident the students will become and the more willing to participate.

**Recognise language difficulties** Give people time to answer questions. Don’t ask students to answer questions without notice. Give them time to work out their answer. Small group work in class appears to work well. Asian students are often very good at working in small groups. They can prepare their feedback so have time to manage the language. Sometimes the teacher can move around the groups so that they can give the feedback to them in that small environment, before they have to present back to the larger group. Relate the issues being discussed to the specific place in the text, for ease of access to those who are slow at reading English.

**Clearly set out expectations.** Clarify your expectations so that they match with the students’ expectations. Use a marking criteria sheet for assignments. This will assist all students to learn from their mistakes. Explain how the assessment works and what the expectations are. Important to explain and discuss plagiarism. Also ensure they have the necessary data collection skills for the assessment type that you are setting.

**Recognising age and experience.** At post graduate level the difference is one of work experience and maturity rather than nationality – some lecturers stream according to work experience others deliberately mix and explain the reason for mixing.

**Supplementary tutorials** – these can be on any topic from study skills to understanding statistics. They are open to every one, but are used largely by international students.

**Glossary of terms** so that students can ensure an understanding of unfamiliar terms. The aural component is also important. Students may understand what the word means when they read it, but not recognise it when spoken. If such a glossary could be oral as well as written this may assist.

**Use of Activities.** Discussion groups around important content work well. A ‘getting to know you activity’ can help break the ice and encourage integration between different groups.

**Conclusions**

All of these strategies are currently being used successfully, and the search for more ideas is a continuous one. Being as inclusive as possible is important – if talking about cities, mention cities from around the world. When discussing theories, provide the cultural context for the theory and then ask students to think about their own context, and express a view. They won’t always answer – but the issue is raised in a way that gives importance to their context. Small groups appear to encourage discussion. The importance of inter-cultural communication and activity – the fact that in today’s business world every one will have to deal with people from different countries and
cultures must be explicit. The classroom provides a safe environment for developing skills in this area.

Although there is much more work to do the results so far have been promising. Lecturers using these strategies appear to have far less difficulty with domestic students complaining about international students in group work activity. When the students form groups for any activity it appears taken for granted that diversity is important. The ability of international students to use acceptable analytical processes appears to be growing.

At the end of the interviews respondents were asked if participation in the interviews had changed their view about international students in any way. Some of the respondents appear particularly relevant

“I don’t know how to deal with these issues.”

“At the workplace comments about international students are largely negative – the interview provided an opportunity to see them in a more positive light. There appears to be an unfair distribution of resources – international fee income does not appear to be distributed in a way that impacts on the quality of the teaching and learning process. “

The challenge is to encourage staff to develop the attitudes and skills to implement these strategies, and to recognise that this will assist not only their students but also make their jobs more fulfilling.

References

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