Teaching values: Meeting our obligations under human rights agreements

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Abstract: International agreements (Universal Declaration of Human Rights – UDHR; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child - CRC) make it clear that it is the responsibility of the state to ensure all citizens have educational opportunities to learn attitudes of acceptance and tolerance towards the range of differences that exist between peoples of the world (Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, 2000). This is particularly important in tertiary level courses where the function is to prepare students for employment in occupations where they will be working with people (for example teaching or community work). Individuals’ personal frameworks or understandings about diversity and difference strongly influence their ability to provide service to those clients they perceive as different. If students are to be able to deliver quality service to all, their pre-service courses must address the construction and content of their personal understandings and beliefs about difference. This paper presents a teaching and learning framework that explicitly aims at influencing students’ personal frameworks towards an inclusive human rights perspective. Evaluation of the framework suggests that it is effective in addressing students’ beliefs and subsequent behaviour.

Keywords: Human rights, value change, diversity

International agreements (Universal Declaration of Human Rights – UDHR; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child - CRC) state it is the responsibility of the state to ensure all citizens have educational opportunities to learn attitudes of acceptance and tolerance towards the range of differences that exist between peoples of the world (Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, 2000). This is particularly important in tertiary level courses where students are prepared for employment in occupations working with people (for example teaching or community work). Attitudes and values strongly underpin learning (Billett, 1996) and influence what students understand and remember from their pre-service training. Individuals’ personal frameworks or understandings about diversity and difference strongly influence their ability to provide service to those clients they perceive as different.

Teaching values/personal frameworks
Over the past 6 years a model of teaching values has been developed by the author and tested in the Difference and Diversity unit, a part of the Children and Family Studies course at Edith Cowan University. Firstly, attitudes and values were linked to practice. Secondly, a model was developed to structure how to best design the course to influence students’ personal frameworks / values. The aim of this current paper is to summarise the research evaluating the effectiveness of the model.
**Linking values to practice**

Understandings of diversity and difference vary, and impact on the way service is subsequently delivered to those perceived as different (Sims, 1999). One common construction holds that difference is wrong or bad, and that those who are different should therefore be excluded from our communities, our services and in general, our world. For example, in 1939, Goebbels wrote about the Jews:

> They are no longer people, but beasts. There is therefore not a humanitarian, but a surgical task. Here we must make radical incision. Otherwise Europe will be ruined by Jewish sickness. (Supple, 1998, p130)

In Australia, Aborigines were also excluded from the human race, and this provided justification for early settlers to kill them.

> ... killing was regarded as justifiable preventative measure ... there is also ample evidence that, when in doubt, settlers were for years inclined to shoot on sight. (Rowley, 1970, p72, 112, 191 - 192)

People with disability also experienced exclusion from so-called ‘normal’ life and at one point a practice, similar to that used by Hitler nearly 150 years later, was considered acceptable:

> I do not think that, to prevent the propagation of this class (idiots and imbeciles) it is necessary to kill them off or to resort to the knife; but if it is necessary it should be done.(Wolfensberger, 1975, p37)

An alternative understanding of diversity is one where difference is still perceived as wrong/bad, but it is something that society must take responsibility to ‘fix’. Today, people with disabilities die as the result of behavioural programmes implemented by staff attempting to change their challenging behaviours: 150 in recent times (Weiss, 1999b)

Similar thinking lead to policies justifying the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families. It was thought living in white Australian institutions or families would erase Aboriginality and create a homogeneous society.

> By the 1930s Neville had refined his ideas of integrating Indigenous people into non-Indigenous society. His model was a biological one of ‘absorption’ or ‘assimilation’, argued in the language of genetics. Unlike the ideology of racial purity that emerged in Germany from eugenics, according to which ‘impure races’ had to be prevented from ‘contaminating’ the pure Aryan race, Neville argued the advantages of ‘miscegenation’ between Aboriginal and white people. They key issue to Neville was skin colour. Once ‘half-castes’ were sufficiently white in colour they would become like white people. (National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, 1997, p108)

A third understanding of difference has evolved out of a misunderstanding of human rights thinking. This position holds that we are all equal under the skin, and paying attention to difference in any way simply draws attention to the ways in which we are not the same, and this is undesirable; difference must be ignored. Unfortunately, when difference is ignored, the needs of all people are not necessarily met effectively. When we are all the same, it is not necessary to have services aimed at meeting the special needs of any particular groups. Pauline Hanson reflects on this, concluding separate services for Aborigines is racist (Hanson, 1996, no page numbers).
Such refusal to recognise that we do not all start equal in life, and that some need additional support to enable them to experience equal opportunity is also reflected in the reaction of many countries to the plight of Jews and other persecuted people immediately prior to World War 2. In a situation with interesting parallels to recent events:

On 13 May, 1939, the ship *St Louis* sailed from Hamburg, with 936 Jews. It was en route to Havana, Cuba. On arrival, they were refused landing and the ship was shunted between Florida and Cuba as US officials argued over its admittance. Entrance to the USA was finally denied and the St Louis forced to return to Europe. France, Belgium and Britain took in refugees from the *St Louis*, but others found no refuge and many of the passengers did not survive the holocaust. (Supple, 1998, p114)

If we believe in a world where humans are all valued and treated with respect (as identified in UDHR and CRC), we have to take responsibility for addressing these issues in our classes and in our courses. We need to deliberately aim to teach students to value difference: to develop personal understandings where difference is respected as inherent in the human condition, not something outside the norm.

**The teaching framework**

Attitudes, once established are extremely difficult to change and exposure to information alone is rarely effective (Wolfensberger, 1991). Thus, a model of teaching was developed to maximise opportunities for personal integration of the values positions and their link to quality practice. This model is shown in Figure 1.

Empowerment theory (Guttiérrez, 1995) indicates that consciousness raising is an important part of the process of producing reflective practitioners capable of identifying situations requiring action, and having available to them sets of strategies to take action (Zimmerman & Warschauisky, 1998). Robinson and Jones-Diaz (1999) discuss a process of reflective learning in their class paralleling this component of the model. Consciousness raising relates to the central route for attitude change identified in standard psychological literature (Feldman, 1995). This central route is the most powerful, and requires presentation of information, opportunities to reflect, and opportunities to prepare arguments to both defend one’s position, and challenge other positions.

Indirect routes are less powerful but do play a role in successful attitude change (Feldman, 1995). A supportive, minimally stressful context will encourage students to reflect on information given. Students in a good mood are more likely to process information (Petty, 1998). Multiple sources of information, perceived by students as authoritative and worthy of respect, and helping students perceive the relevance of the information is also influential in facilitating integration of material given (Petty, Heesacker, & Hughes, 1997).

In the Difference and Diversity unit, students are given information linking attitudes to practice, and opportunities to reflect on their own values, and on their own understanding of quality practice. They are required to analyse the varying attitude positions, the practice arising out of these positions, and determine for themselves their position. Classes combine information sharing with opportunities to debate and discuss issues. It is made very clear to students that the value position they choose to hold will not be evaluated or judged: however, they are expected to justify their position on the basis of their definition of quality practice. Information is presented through a variety of sources including readings, peer discussion, video footage, newspaper/television news articles, and internet resources.
The second component of the model is efficacy. Successful performance depends both on values and on skills to enact these values (Sophian, 1997). The Difference and Diversity unit offers a module on the practical skills necessary to enact one of the attitude positions, that of valuing difference. Students work through a case study in class over a period of several weeks. A range of strategies is explored, and students are encouraged to link what they have learned from other components of the course to this module: emphasising and validating the skills they already possess.

**Figure 1: Model of teaching to influence personal frameworks/values**

**Methodology**

**Participants**

*Study 1*: Participants consisted of students enrolled in the Difference and Diversity unit of the Children and Family Studies degree from 1997 and 1998. Complete data sets (ie no missing data) from 34 students were included in the analysis. Data collection is ongoing and data from further participants will be added as it comes available.

**Figure 2: Participant Profile Study1**

- 30 females, 4 males
- under 20 = 5, 20 – 19 = 16, 30 – 39 = 8, 40 or more = 5
- C&FS major = 27, minor=7

*Study 2*: A random sample of students (n=20) were selected at the end of the Difference and Diversity unit in 2000.
**Figure 3: Participant Profile Study2**

- Ages 19 – 43
- C&FS major= 6, minor=12, elective=2
- Internal study=15, external=5
- No gender identification for confidentiality

**Method**

Study 1: Two questionnaires (Chow & Winzer, 1992); (Antonak & Larrivee, 1995) were selected to measure students' attitudes. These questionnaires were modified from their original forms to incorporate a wider range of difference and diversity (defining difference and diversity as inclusive of ability, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and family form) in comparison to the original focus on only disability. These modifications make comparisons with other research using the original versions of these scales imprudent. All students are requested to complete the questionnaires at the beginning and the end of the semester. Students rated a number of statements on Likert Scales in each questionnaire.

Study 2: Students were interviewed at the end of the unit in 2000, and reinterviewed approximately 6 months later in 2001. Interviews were semi-structured, and data gathered from each participant in the first round was used to personalise the second interview. At the first interview, students were asked to reflect on what they had learned in the unit, and how that learning had influenced their behaviour to date.

**Analysis**

**Study 1: Factor Analysis: Data reduction**

The Likert scores for each of the questionnaires were run through a factor analysis using SPSS, and factor scores calculated for each case. The Chow and Winzer scale (Chow & Winzer, 1992) resulted in the production of 5 factors. Factor 1 represented a unconditional acceptance of difference and diversity. The remaining factors all represented ambivalent feelings. These 5 factors represented nearly 62% of the variance in the data. The Opinions Relative to Integration Scale (Antonak & Larrivee, 1995) produced 7 factors. All 7 factors represented 64% of the variance in the data. As before, Factor 1 represented unconditional acceptance of difference and diversity and was responsible for 29% of the variance. The remaining factors represented various ambivalent or rejecting positions.

**Study 1: Analysis of covariance; values changes**

The factor scores for each of the two questionnaires were used in an analysis of covariance (SPSS). The covariates were: student gender, major or minor in Children and Family Studies, extent of course completed, experience working with children and families in the community and the age group of the students. Only the students who had complete data sets from the beginning and end of the semester in which they undertook the difference and diversity unit (as identified above) were included in this analysis. The analysis was designed to test the hypothesis that there were no changes in attitude produced as a result of undertaking the unit.

**Study 2: identification of themes**

Transcriptions were perused and themes in the data were identified following the process outlined by Colaizzi (1978). The model was used as a guide, so that themes relating to consciousness raising, feelings of efficacy, personal frameworks and behaviour were explicitly sought.
Results

Study 1:
On the Chow and Winzer scale, scores for Factor 1 showed significant differences between the different levels of experience of working with children and families in the field (F=5.675, Significance = 0.021). Students who were rated as having more experience in the field generally tended to score more positively on Factor 1. The before/after variable (F=9.775, Significance=0.003) also showed a significant difference with scores being more positive at the end of the semester after the completion of the difference and diversity unit: ie students were more positive about difference and diversity. Overall, the F value for the corrected model was 3.747 which was significant at 0.004 level.

Using the Opinions Relative to Integration Scale, the corrected model had an F value of 2.461 with a significance of 0.039. The first factor was significant for the before/after variable (F=8.748, Significance 0.005) with students scoring more positively on the factor at the end of the semester in which they undertook the difference and diversity unit: ie students were more positive towards difference and diversity at the end of the unit.

Study 2:
Students reflected on the impact of the unit in raising their awareness:

…learning this unit has just opened my eyes amazingly, the information that I’ve got now, I can be far less judgemental I suppose, and think before I open my mouth instead of rattling off (Student 19 – round 1)

Students also identified increased feelings of self efficacy:

…it’s because of that fundamental value change that I feel like I’ve had that I felt that the unit equipped me to be able to work with any setting, with anybody with some sort of difference and to really value that difference for what it is … the unit has made me feel more comfortable …it’s given me the skills that I can really take and use in those settings, which I wouldn’t have had before (Student 10 – round 1)

A number of students were aware they had changed as a result of undertaking the unit and these changes appeared to be lasting:

I’m a lot more open minded, more willing to listen to what other people have got to say and their views whereas before it was like really I thought everyone should be the same we’re all Australians and we should be equal and stuff (Student 6 – round 2)

One student described how the changes in her thinking helped her cope when, in the intervening 6 months, her child was diagnosed with a disability:

… a lot of people say that they are evil and they are blind because their mother has done evil things … and that was my perspective … I am still afraid of them but after I study this course, it turn around, I have turned around from this, I don’t feel that way now, it is totally different (Student 9 – round 1)

I am glad I studied the unit because I know it is not a disability and I know what his lack of and what I can do with him … I find that it has benefited me a lot … I don’t put a title on my son I just treat him normally …so it is a lot easier you know to talk to people now (Student 9 – round 2)
Finally, students gave examples of how their changed thinking had resulted in changes in their behaviour:

I sort of sit there and say “you shouldn’t say it like this, you should say it like this, because they are still people” and yeah, they’ve sort of taken that on board now and they sort of know not to say things around me because otherwise I chuck a tantrum at them … they don’t like me nagging them about what they’re saying but I think a lot of people don’t actually have any interaction with people with disabilities and people with difference and so those sort of in-built prejudices just stay there and they really need something or someone to actually just go up to them and you know, open their eyes …(Student 7 – round 2)

Discussion and Conclusion

The data demonstrate that students undertaking this unit made changes in their thinking that impacted on their behaviour. These changes lasted at least 6 months after the completion of the unit. This suggests that the model of teaching and learning operating in the unit is one that is effective in prompting changes in students’ personal frameworks.

The combination of consciousness raising and efficacy is the important factor in the model presented in this paper. It is important to recognise that conscious raising, whilst extremely important, can not alone lead to changes in people’s behaviour. When our task is the preparation of professionals to work in the community, we can not be satisfied by changes in the thinking alone of our students. We have a responsibility to ensure that students’ practice is reflective of the highest professional and moral standards. We must create in all of our courses, opportunities for students to learn about the issues associated with diversity in our communities, to understand issues of power and powerlessness, oppression, and the subtle ways that we create an ‘us’ and ‘them’ division. We must provide students with the cognitive tools to work with children to understand current community debates (for example the current debate in WA about the amendments to the Equal Opportunities legislation, particularly as it relates to lesbians and homosexuals), to see these as wonderful learning opportunities to address issues of human rights and equality and to not be frightened by the widely differing attitude positions these debates invoke. Students need not just a human rights framework, they need the tools to implement this in their practice. The model of teaching and learning discussed here provides one framework that can be used to empower students to deal with human rights issues in their practice, to the betterment of the children with whom they work, and ultimately to our society.

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