

Cross-dressing in quality management: an intercultural experience

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In Australian Higher Education there is currently much discussion about developing curriculum that will prepare a diverse student group for a changing world. With our multicultural student population which includes large numbers of international students, opportunities exist for developing new ways of thinking about teaching and learning.

In this paper we will present an interdisciplinary collaboration which attempts to address the issue of the internationalisation of the curriculum as well as intercultural learning. We will focus on the creation of a learning space where students are involved in an authentic, negotiated learning experience. This takes the form of a student-run academic conference which is located in a third year Quality Management subject within a Bachelor of Business degree. In this context the students are simultaneously dealing with the TQM theory and putting it into practice.

The focus on the reflections of the participants in this experience show the development of their thinking in this often conflicting, intercultural, academic environment.

Introduction

In recent years there have been significant pressures on universities to design programs which equip students to successfully perform in a rapidly changing workplace. Not only are employees required to work harder and smarter in order for businesses to survive but exiting students are expected to take into the workplace a solid theoretical base along with a capacity to be strategic thinkers, reflective about their practice, effective team members, have excellent communication skills as well as being adaptable and open to new forms of learning.

An additional consideration is the internationalisation of Australian Higher Education and the increasing demands placed on providers to internationalise the curriculum and focus on cultural objectives as well as introducing integrated classroom practices. Blackburn (1997) cautions us to look closely at the meaning of internationalisation and its ethical implications and to question whose interests it serves. She raises the issue of an ethic of care in relation to international students as learners and as a source of business. She adds that Moberg (1994) claims there are links between stakeholder theory and an ethic of care with its recognition of relationship and mutuality.

The university classroom is a diverse mix of cultures, backgrounds, learning styles, life experiences, values and expectations. The presence of international students offers an ideal opportunity for the promotion of cultural understanding, social cohesion and intercultural learning (Volet & Ang, 1998). This places the onus on universities to develop policies and programs to meet the needs of those people involved and to revise approaches to staff development as well as curriculum design. It presents critical opportunities for teaching staff and students alike. Tertiary students need to be at the centre of the learning process and be motivated to be self-managing and self-responsible and acquire skills, knowledge and behaviours that will enable them to continue learning in the workplace, in a multicultural society and in a globalised business world.

This then has important implications for course design and approaches to teaching. Students should be in programs where they are given the opportunity to make sense of

the concepts and material they are dealing with by exploring ideas and posing their own problems. In addition the learning environment should be one where intercultural learning can take place.

There has been considerable emphasis in recent times on interdisciplinary collaboration between TESOL academics and academics of other discipline areas, as well as the development of integrated curricula. Short (1994) and Kaufman & Brooks (1996) discuss this issue and point out the importance of creating a classroom where the students are involved in contextualised learning, where they are constructing their own meaning in an environment of critical inquiry. Pennycook (1997:39) defines learner autonomy as a possibility to create one's own meanings, to pursue cultural alternatives amid the politics of everyday life, or to be aware of and able to make informed choices in a multicultural environment. Kaufman & Brooks (ibid) go on to say in such a classroom, teachers themselves are also learners.

In the School of Business at Swinburne University, a unique opportunity presented itself where an attempt was made to address the issues outlined above. One of the authors is a Business Modelling lecturer teaching a third year Quality Management subject and her class has a high proportion of International students. The other author has a TESOL background and conducts a Business Communication class for International students in the Business degree. We are both interested in student centred, contextualised learning and culturally inclusive educational practice.

A teaching model was developed based on a pre-tertiary 10 week EAP course presented by Cadman & Grey (1993) and Cadman & Grey (in press (1999)) underpinned by their Action Teaching approach (1997). This model is based on a half day student-run academic conference. Radloff & de la Harpe (1998) have also used the student-run conference, but as a vehicle for teaching communication skills to first year Physics students. The development of our approach, was the setting up of the classroom as an intercultural learning organisation where the students were simultaneously dealing with and reflecting on the Quality theory as well as organising and staging the academic conference. The Quality class also presented at the conference along with other groups of undergraduates drawn from the School of Business as well as the School of Behavioural Science.

In this paper it is proposed to highlight some reflections of participants who were involved in the experience, the content lecturer, the language lecturer and several students from the conference organising committee. It will show that where there is a re-conceptualisation of the curriculum and when the students' decision making determines the process and direction of the learning, then ideas will proliferate, there will be genuine praxis and other cultural perspectives will be explored.

Participant reflections

In order for this kind of collaboration to be successful the academic staff and students involved should be flexible, open to new forms of learning and interactions, as well as being risk takers. Furthermore, a negotiated process needs to be established at the outset. An important part of this process is the introduction of a reflective journal where students take control of the learning by raising questions related to not only the theory and practice they are involved in but their values and expectations of the total experience. In this journal, students enter into a dialogue with one another as well as

their lecturers. The following entries show clearly the development of their thinking and the social perceptions and dynamics throughout the experience.

Setting up the conference: the first reflections

S1 [local student]

Today I went to a class where we are to organise a conference as part of our assessment. At this point I can't see the relevance of quality or any of its aspects being introduced or related to this type of assessment. But as the saying goes "time will only tell".

S2 [international student]

I found it not very difficult to study in a class as a result of the atmosphere set up by the teachers.

S3 [NESB local student]

The teacher should tell the students exactly what to do and how to organise the conference

Lecturer 1

It's as I expected. When asked to brainstorm what a conference was, the local students quickly formed their own groups and the internationals looked uncertain as to how to proceed.

Lecturer 2

I felt this collaboration would provide students with the opportunity of working in an authentic TQM environment where the three core principles are:

A focus on customers

Participation and teamwork

Continuous improvement and learning

S1 [local student]

Just because I got the ball rolling I got elected as the chairperson

Anyway I am, so I hope they don't think I'm too much of a dictator.

S4 [NESB local student]

Student M has put in a lot of effort setting up the web site for the posting of the abstracts. His group has made tremendous progress and the site is user-friendly.

I'm worried about the fund raising group as they seem vague and lost. I would like to offer some assistance but I do not want to insult them. I'm glad I'm handing in my journal today as I'd like some feedback on how you think I'm going. I'm a bit frustrated.

Mid-course reflections

S1 [local student]

Workplace: The Classroom of the Future. Not a bad title for a conference if I do say so myself. I am pleased to see students are consulting with one another before going ahead with a task. It shows they care and they have passion for the conference. It is an important ingredient for success in any assignment.

S4 [international student]

I am angry because the chairperson changed my design of the brochure without asking me. I'm worried about this. It's difficult for me to tell him what I think. Can I say what I think in the journal?

S5 [local student]

The International students shouldn't be on the editorial committee because they can't write. I had to correct all the mistakes.

Lecturer 1

As a fund raising activity, a group of international students showed a lot of initiative by making food from their countries and selling it in the foyer. Even though they did not consult with the actual committee, it was generally thought to be a great idea. When they

handed the money to the committee and we shared some leftovers I thought it was a turning point in class relations.

Lecturer 2

The honeymoon period was over. Everyone was busy doing something, but little was being achieved. The editorial committee experienced frustration with slow and inappropriate responses from participants. Students learnt that customers are not always aware of their needs.

Final stage reflections

S1 [local student]

Invited staff haven't responded well to our communications. I'm not sure what to do. They don't seem very interested to attend our conference. I'm really pleased to see the close relationship being built between the students. It's interesting to see how a pack of individuals in week 1 can develop into a harmonious working group in the space of 8 weeks. It is fantastic.

S2 [NESB local]

Now I know why professionals like to own their own equipment and test them one day before the event. This can reduce uncontrollable risk and improve quality. Students learn a lot from this student-managed learning. Students share responsibility and commitment just like in the real work force.

S3 [international student]

This conference gives me the direct experience and teaches me how to work with other people who have different backgrounds, attitudes, ideas and behaviours.

S4 [local student]

I am a leader.

S6 [international]

The **whole** committee worked together. I never before worked with local students like this.

Lecturer 2

I was impressed with the professionalism of the final product. Students had learnt a lot about participation, teamwork and persistence.

Conclusion

The reflections indicate the level of confidence, control and ownership the students developed as a result of this authentic, intercultural experience. Furthermore their grasp of the content matter was enhanced as a result of this process. The collaboration was a challenge for the participants but one we wholeheartedly endorse. It is an experience that will be repeated.

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