

Intercultural confidence at university

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Background.

Australia has the world's second most internationalised higher education system together with an already diverse domestic student population. This creates unique opportunities for intercultural interaction, and the development of intercultural confidence. Much is known about the challenges of cross-cultural contact but less is known about how cultural diversity can be used productively, particularly to enhance learning outcomes. This paper explores the notion of intercultural confidence, and how it can be fostered through curriculum activities in professional courses. We seek to move the research agenda away from identifying the challenges of cultural diversity to determining *how the opportunities created by cultural diversity can be harnessed* to enhance students' professional competence and intercultural confidence.

Aims. The aims of the broader research project are two fold:

- Theoretical - to combine a cognitive-situative perspective, social identity theory, contact theory, and social capital theory, to understand the process of intercultural development.
- Applied - a) trace how diverse groups of students shape each other's development of social identities and intercultural confidence, b) establish how curriculum activities incorporating cultural dimensions of particular professions foster intercultural confidence.

This paper has a more modest aim:

- To outline the main issues around intercultural interaction on university campuses and in relation to learning
- To provide some options for development of social and learning activities on campus to improve intercultural confidence, particularly for professional programs

Main contribution:

The paper explores aspects of intercultural interaction and learning, including the concept of intercultural confidence, and then outlines preparation and pilot results of a 3 year study aiming

to establish the *process* by which university students enrolled in 'professional' programs, enter and navigate the diverse learning communities in their study program and out of class, and how their emergent social identities shape opportunities to mix with one another within and across contexts. We outline preliminary work on planned profession-linked curriculum activities to foster students' awareness of their own socially constructed cultural identity; appreciation of ways cultural dimensions affect professional competence; and positive dispositions towards cross-cultural experiences and intercultural development in study and professional practice.

Implications

The research provides a conceptual basis for the development of innovative teaching practices that capitalise on diversity, enhancing students' preparation for professional practice. Theoretical understandings will be applicable to other contexts of intercultural interaction, helping to understand the bases for social cohesion in diverse societies.

Introduction.

Australia has the world's second most internationalised higher education system - 25% of students come from overseas, joining an already diverse domestic student population (over 40% of Australia's population were born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas). As well as the mainstream Australian population, campuses have students from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds including Chinese, Indian, Vietnamese, Malaysian, Singaporean, Indonesian, Saudi Arabian, and from various European and other Western nations such as Canada and the US. Local students from what are known as the 'new communities' derived from refugee intakes from Africa, the Middle East and Asian are also joining the already diverse student populations. This creates unique opportunities for intercultural interaction, and the development of intercultural confidence. Much is known about the challenges of cross-cultural contact but less is known about how cultural diversity can be used productively, particularly to enhance learning outcomes. This paper, based on a research program at Murdoch University, Western Australia, undertaken by teacher/practitioners, explores the

notion of intercultural confidence, and how it can be fostered through curriculum activities in professional courses. The wider project seeks to advance theoretical understandings of culturally diverse learning communities, social identities, and the mechanisms by which intercultural contact works. We seek to move the research agenda away from identifying the challenges of cultural diversity to determining how the opportunities created by cultural diversity can be harnessed to enhance students' professional competence and intercultural confidence.

Research background.

The challenges of cultural diversity in higher education are well documented. Diversity is widely presented as a challenge, particularly in relation to the more culturally 'distant' sojourners and new migrant groups (Asmar, 2005; Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009). This research departs from the literature by examining the potential of diversity, i.e. the process by which intercultural interactions and confidence emerge and can be fostered, rather than how that process is inhibited. We are interested in the benefits of diversity, both general, and learning-specific, including awareness of the cultural construction of knowledge; of alternate knowledges; of alternate learning styles; the potential to counter outgroup prejudices; opportunities for the fostering of intercultural competence and confidence; the development of social and cultural capital (relevant generally and professionally); and of an 'international outlook' (Montgomery, 2009) and identity.

Given that we are 'practitioners' on a multicultural campus, our focus is on intercultural learning opportunities and the potential of these to modify off-campus social interactional choices and identity. Intercultural learning is best facilitated in higher education through collaborative learning activities using mixed groups (e.g. Dillenbourg, 1999; Dunstan, 2003; Ryan & Hellmundt, 2005). However research, including our own, reports barriers such as academic and time pressures, identity and communication issues, cultural-emotional connectedness, negative stereotypes, ethnocentrism and apathy, all of which inhibit cross cultural interactions and therefore learning opportunities (eg Ippolito, 2007; Leung, 2001; Oetzel, 2001; Kimmel & Volet, 2009; Ujitani & Volet, 2008; Smart, Volet & Ang, 2000; Volet & Ang 1998). Students prefer homogeneity in both learning and social environments; and there is a decline in students' attitudes towards mixed group projects over time (Summers & Volet, in press). In-group bias is also widely present in students' informal, out-of-class, social activities, even when there have been

opportunities for interactions as part of their university studies – i.e. on-campus mixing does not result in off-campus mixing (Kimmel and Volet, 2010). The result is a lack of intercultural interactions among culturally diverse student groups, and a sense of isolation, loneliness and exclusion, particularly among international students (Sawir et al, 2008).

These findings reflect the homophily found in interactional choices generally. Social identity theory and intergroup contact theory identify the conditions under which positive intergroup relations take place and how reinforcement of stereotypes may occur when these conditions are not met. Societal, situational and personal variables enhance or undermine the effects of contact (Hewstone & Brown, 1986). Contact theory requires equality in status, at least within the contact context; pursuit of a common goal; opportunities for cooperative interaction; interaction occurring within a supportive authority structure (Allport, 1954) and close relationships where real communication, understanding and affection can develop (Pettigrew, 1998). It has also been argued that interaction should occur under conditions where ethnic identity is salient (Tilbury, 2000; Gaertner, 1994) – see argument following. The reduction in prejudice and broadening of outlook is likely to work through four processes: changes in knowledge; behaviour; emotions; and group identity (producing a more inclusive identity) (Pettigrew 1998).

In terms of identification, we use social identity theory (McGarty, 1999) to build understanding of participation in culturally diverse learning communities (Jetten *et al*, 2004). Social identity theory links the processes of 'group categorisation', a product of natural tendencies to categorise in order to make sense of the world, and of 'social comparison' which results in an evaluation of one's own group in relation to others (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Brewer and Miller, 1984; Turner, 1988; Brown and Turner, 1981). Members of the same group are positively evaluated, members of different groups negatively. The result is stereotyping and prejudice. In intergroup interaction, members of out-groups are reacted to, not as individuals, but as members of a negatively evaluated group – they are depersonalised, perceived as "undifferentiated items in a unified social category" (Brewer and Miller, 1984:282). A similar process occurs in interaction with in-group members who are positively evaluated (Brewer and Miller, 1984).

According to contact theory, interaction between members of different groups should result in individuation, seeing the person as an individual rather than group member, or in a blurring of group

boundaries, as assumed differences are proven wrong (Gaertner *et al.*, 1994; Pettigrew, 1986). However, if group membership is not salient in interaction, generalisation to the group may not occur and intergroup relations may remain unchanged (Brown and Turner, 1981; Hewstone and Brown, 1986). Thus “viewing an out-group member *individually*, rather than *categorically*, may facilitate favourable attitudes toward the individual, but not toward his or her group” (Jackson, 1993:46). Where contact is ‘interpersonal’ rather than ‘intergroup’ in terms of interactants’ perceptions, the individual group member may be seen as the exception to the rule (a process which Allport (1954) called ‘fence mending’) and favourable attitudes to that individual will not be generalised to the group to which they belong.

Utilising social identity theory, other theorists conclude that contact only works when it changes the nature and structure of the intergroup relationship. Gaertner *et al.*, for instance, propose that the ideal conditions for positive contact transforms members’ cognitive representations of membership in two opposing groups to that of one all inclusive group:

equal status, cooperative interaction, interpersonal interaction, and supportive norms reduce bias because they alter members’ cognitive representations of the memberships from ‘us’ and ‘them’ to a more inclusive ‘we’. (Gaertner *et al.*, 1994:226)

It is vital to examine the ways in which individuals develop multiple social identities as they interact within and across diverse communities, and how these (perceived or assigned) identities play a mediating role by enabling or inhibiting intercultural interactions. Since those members of majority groups with a strong ethnic identification tend to be less in favour of multiculturalism, and those with weaker identifications are more open (Verkuyten and Martinovic, 2006), this is likely to affect their orientation to interactional learning opportunities.

To date, research has not explored the processes of identification (self/in-group), categorization (other/out-group) and comparison involved in intercultural learning situations. How are learning environments constituted as ‘intercultural’, and how do they evolve over time? What identities are most salient and how do they interact with cognition, emotion and action (eg Jenkins, 2003)? How are identities co-regulated in the learning environment (McCaslin, 2009), and how can these be used to improve intercultural learning opportunities?

The project will a) collect data on the process by which intercultural confidence actually emerges in diverse learning communities; b) recognize the

significance of both formal and informal contexts for intercultural development; c) focus on the inclusion of newly emerging cultural groups (African and Muslim heritage) and d) develop learning activities embedded within students’ professional study programs in preparation for cultural dimensions of work. These insights will provide a sound knowledge base for improved design and implementation of intercultural learning opportunities.

Conceptual Tools.

This section outlines the development of concepts and tools useful for the study of intercultural interaction and learning, including the development of the concept of intercultural confidence. It provides early results of the 3 year study aiming to establish the *process* by which university students enrolled in ‘professional’ programs, enter and navigate the diverse learning communities in their study program and out of class, and how their emergent social identities shape opportunities to mix with one another within and across contexts. We provide mainly qualitative evidence at this point, as the quantitative data is currently being collected. We outline preliminary work on the principles behind planned profession-linked curriculum activities to foster students’ awareness of their own socially constructed cultural identity; appreciation of ways cultural dimensions affect professional competence; and positive dispositions towards cross-cultural experiences and intercultural development in study and professional practice.

We focus on a number of conceptual tools useful in developing both the instruments to study and the opportunities for improved intercultural relations themselves, as part of university campus life and learning opportunities.

One is the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS) (Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman, 2003). This well studied model sees positive intercultural interactions as more likely to occur between people at a higher stage of development of intercultural competence. The development of intercultural competence consists of three stages with an ethnocentric orientation, where one’s culture is the dominant lens through which reality is experienced (Denial, Defense, Minimization), and three orientations that take a more ethno-relative stance, where one’s culture is experienced in the context of other cultures (Acceptance, Adaptation, Integration). We propose that students will orient towards opportunities for intercultural interactions in formal and informal environments in different ways depending on their likely developmental stage. We have also incorporated aspects of the multicultural personality questionnaire (MPQ) (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven 2000, 2001) that measures five dimensions relevant to positive intercultural

interactions: cultural empathy, open mindedness, social initiatives, emotional stability and flexibility.

We also develop the notion of intercultural confidence. Here we argue that for intercultural learning opportunities to yield positive outcomes, students must develop a sense of intercultural confidence – competence is not enough – students must feel confident in their ability to negotiate across cultural diversity. This is part of a process of ‘tertiary socialisation’ (as distinct from primary and secondary) according to Alred and Byram (2002) whereby students gain *Savoir-être*, “an affective capacity to relinquish ethnocentric attitudes towards otherness and perceptions of otherness and a cognitive ability to establish and maintain a relationship between native culture(s) and foreign culture(s)” and *Savoir apprendre*, “an ability to produce and operate an interpretative system with which to gain insight into unknown cultural meanings, beliefs and practices in both familiar and new language and culture”. (Byram and Risager, 1999: 66). This affective capacity and cognitive skills are, we argue, a form of cultural capital which is particularly useful not just in everyday life but in professional situations that call for intercultural interaction.

Alred and Byram identify a number of preconditions and skills necessary for the development of this sense of confidence: attitudes that relativise the self and value the other, thus decentring one’s own behaviours, beliefs and values [*savoir être*]; knowledge of one’s own and other’s behaviours, beliefs and values, and of the perceptions of each of these by the other; skills of interpreting and relating the things one encounters based on existing knowledge and attitudes, of discovering new behaviours, beliefs and values [*savoir apprendre*], and of interacting based on other preconditions and skills [*savoir faire*]. They also point out that within an educational setting, it requires the teacher to develop ‘critical cultural awareness’. It relates to another measure, cultural intelligence (Earley 2002), which focuses on motivation to engage with new cultures and provide culturally appropriate response in a new environment. This reflects one’s confidence in managing uncertainties in cross cultural interactions, and goes to both resilience and commitment – what we might call ‘stick-to-ativeness’.

The notion of intercultural confidence builds on Bandura’s work on self-efficacy – that people’s motivation, affective states and action are likely to be based more on what people believe than what is objectively true (Bandura, 1997). Those with a strong sense of self-efficacy are likely to approach threatening situations, situations in which they may feel uncomfortable and out of place, with a sense of self assurance that they will be able to cope. Those

with low self-efficacy are more likely to experience anxiety and give up in the face of difficulties. While much research is focused on the skills necessary to develop intercultural competence, we argue that a sense of confidence in one’s ability to successfully engage in intercultural interaction, and leverage the benefits thereof, is a vital aspect in the success of intercultural learning opportunities. Some work has been done in this area by Anita Mak, who has developed a Social Self-Efficacy Scale for Students measuring four factors, absence of social difficulties, social confidence, sharing interests and friendship initiatives (see Fan and Mak 1998) – her focus has been on expatriate or sojourner experiences, but she has also developed a training course for international students (see Mak and Buckingham, 2007). We consider the development of intercultural confidence vital for local populations of diverse backgrounds, as well as international students.

Each of these conceptual tools has been incorporated into the design of our research instruments, and our preliminary interventions. In the rest of the paper we outline a few interesting preliminary findings from different parts of the study.

We have undertaken two pilot studies, one with Community Development students, one with Veterinary students. These are outlined below. We have also undertaken a large survey of first year students – over 800 students enrolled in ‘professional’ programs such as IT, Business, Community Development, Journalism, Engineering – and are currently analysing the results. The questionnaire explored dimensions of students entry profile including history of intercultural interactions; perceived personal social and cultural identity; sense of interdependence; disposition towards cross-cultural experiences; expectations of peer interactions in class/outside class in 1st semester; goals; intercultural confidence; conceptions of learning; and orientations to group work. We look forward to being able to present our findings at a future conference.

Identity – complex and contextual

We included a question on self-identified ethnic identity in the survey (as well as questions about languages and country where schooling was undertaken, also aimed at getting at identity). After much discussion and trialling, we used the following wording “Thinking about yourself, what is your own cultural identity(ies)?”. For now we include a selection of responses as teasers – while we have not yet analysed the ways in which these identities (which include aspects of racial, cultural, gendered, class, sexuality, and other dimensions) may affect orientation to intercultural interactions, it is likely that this dimension, often taken for granted in the literature and study designs, is fundamental to how

students relate to each other, and present themselves. Clearly from the examples given, they are beginning to provide our analysis for us – they recognise the complexity of ethnic identity.

We received many interesting responses. Some were standard, identifying country of origin such as: *Indonesian; Nigerian; Lebanese* etc. Others were hybrid: *english, sth african and Australian; Australian and Indian; russian/Australian; Australian born in India; Malaysian Chinese*. Some used broader categories: *anglo saxon; Asian; Oceanic*. But a large number used complex mixed categories or extended explanations to refer to their ‘cultural’ identities, as the following list attests.

2nd gen Australia; anglo-celtic; working class; female; gen x

Australian but born Italian - strong links Sth Italy traditions (Sicilian and Calabrese)

Australian exposed to other cultures

I'm Australian but have no real cultural identity beside having a BBQ with friends

Still deciding

citizen of the world

Confused

More than Ceylonese, which is Sri Lankan Indian, I like to believe that being born and brought up in a multicultural society has led me to being less ignorant about diff societies and cultures

PS3 Fanboy

Westernised Bangladeshi, global citizenship, Singaporean

White, middle class, male, gay, with a disability

Country scone kids

Asian with large western influence, whilst maintaining asian values

These dimensions, as well as being correlated with other results, will be followed up in a series of interviews allowing students the opportunity to talk about their identities and its relationship to their orientation to intercultural interactions on and off campus.

Orientation to intercultural group work

In a small pilot study of community development students engaged in mixed group work as part of their university studies, we found a number of features: students were keen on the idea of mixed group work; students found mixed group work challenging, and group work with those of the same background ‘easy’; students were reticent to see problems in terms of cultural differences; and

students were reticent to ‘see culture’. We offer a single quote from a community development student as illustration:

I was happy to be working with a multi-culturally mixed group because it's interesting to get other perspectives. But as we went on it got a lot harder. ...It really challenged my thoughts as well. I always viewed myself as very accepting and non-racist. I still am, but I found that multi-cultural thing really hard to overcome. It was hard to communicate. I was worried about making them feel insulted if I told them what was wrong.

This quote illustrates the general positivity towards intercultural interaction and intercultural learning, common among those living in a multicultural country where positive engagement with diversity has been part of the political agenda for decades. It is also likely to be more common among those students engaged in degrees leading to the ‘helping professions’. However we also see clear evidence of the reality of the challenges faced in practise. Most interesting is the student’s reconsideration of her identity as ‘accepting and non-racist’; and her sensitivity about not wanting to correct them, but simultaneous absolute faith that she knows what is right. It may go some way to begin explaining Summers and Volet’s (in press) finding that attitudes towards mixed group work decline over the course of study.

The invisibility of culture

We found a similar phenomenon among vet students. An opportunity arose to engage in a professional development/research activity with veterinary students engaged in their 5th and final year of study. This project explored how students understand and are likely to deal with issues of cultural diversity in veterinary professional practice, and sought to identify specific educational needs. Eleven focus groups of 6 to 8 students discussed a scenario involving a challenging clinical encounter with a client from a ‘different culture’ as well as some general questions about intercultural interaction and its perceived importance; we also collected information on intercultural experience, ethnic identity, cultural attitudes and opinions through a brief survey.

While analysis is preliminary, a number of factors stand out. One is the desire not to interpret the clinical encounter in ‘cultural’ terms. An example follows:

4 - Yeah to an extent it could be cultural, but...

5 - Yeah, I wouldn't say that, I wouldn't necessarily jump in and go cultural, but I don't know if that's ((inaudible)) entirely cultural

((group agreement))

1 - *It could be more geographical in this sense like...*

3 - *Yeah, or just, or just that she doesn't know any better like you know, like just not necessarily cultural just she had an animal before and the only way she knows to stop it barking is to tie it's mouth up.*

1 - *Yeah, yep.*

3 - *So not necessarily cultural I suppose.*

This followed through to a clear preference not to 'see' cultural difference, even among classmates. This tendency has been noted as common in an environment where 'colour blindness' is seen to be normative (Frankenberg, 1993). Given the necessity of seeing interactions in terms of culture, for changes to occur, this may limit the opportunities for intercultural learning.

Planned interventions

From the literature and early analysis of our different studies, we have developed a preliminary set of possible interventions. These are based on a number of principles, including the need for students to consider their own cultural identities, to consider others cultural identities, to see the interaction as intercultural, and to see themselves as having the skills and confidence to successfully negotiate such encounters, leading to opportunities to change knowledge, behaviour, emotions and identities. These include on-campus learning activities that require structural changes and teacher support.

- Peer pairing programs – for formal and informal activities (Quintrell and Westwood 1994; Pritchard and Skinner 2002; Leask 2009)
- Modifying interactional and learning environment structures such as Orientation, tutorials and group work (esp task design) (Todd and Nesdale 1997; Watsons, Kumar, Michaelson 1993; Watson, Johnson and Merritt 1998; Hobman, Bordia and Gallois 2004; Wright and Lander 2003; Leask 2009; Summers and Volet 2008; Volet and Ang 1998). It is likely compulsory activities will be required. Also opportunities for recreational activities on (and off) campus.
- Intercultural competency assessment as part of learning objectives
- Broadening opportunities across contexts (Leask 2009 – co-location is insufficient)
- Encouraging cohort cohesiveness effects – building communities of students
- Self reflection opportunities (diaries, journals)

- Structured teacher support
- Diversity awareness training (focussed on knowledge, attitudes, behaviours).

However we would be naïve not to recognise that there are challenges or limiting factors that are likely to affect the success of these interventions.

- Time pressures (work, family etc, international students seen as having more time – results in division of tasks rather than collaboration, not recognised as lost opportunities by locals; duration of interaction)
- Course structure/characteristics (opportunities for cohort cohesiveness effects; academic standards/skills; professional attitudes)
- Orientation to group (team) work generally, based on professional orientation
- Cultural orientation (collectivist etc, Triandis, 1995)
- Extended contact effect (positive and negative stories/exps of others affect attitudes)
- Political climate (also affects 'ownership of the problem')
- Degree of difference (also related to identity and intergroup relations)
- Individual past experiences (Summers and Volet 2008)

These act as confounding factors that teachers may have little influence over.

Conclusion

As a result of implementing some of these interventions, in collaboration with class teachers, we hope to produce more students reporting the sort of experience that this African Australian community development student reports:

It was a friendly group, we collaborated together and everyone valued somebody else's ideas. We gave feedback on what we have found. There was nice communication through emails and text messages. It gave everyone motivation to go and research their own area, then we get what is relevant and bring it together. ...It was really good for me because I am always mixed with Australian students. ...I was the only one who wasn't Australian. They listened to me and I listened to them. ...I think mixing with other cultures is really good. I was glad [teacher insisted on mixed groups because] It might be difficult to say 'I don't want you in my group' if you know him. Everyone would think it would be

easier (to keep to your own cultural group), but I think it would be more useful to have mixed groups. It is a more collaborative effort.

And we would hope that such positive experiences would encourage students both to extend their interactions to off campus situations, and to apply their learning to their professional work.

Students' willingness to participate and engage in culturally mixed group projects is vital in countries with culturally diverse populations, as such experiences may influence their success in a diverse workplace, especially in professional occupations that demand well developed communication and interpersonal skills to deal with culturally diverse clients (e.g. health sciences, management, marketing, community development, education). Given the tendency to homophily, gaining insight into the nature of intra- and inter-cultural experiences that are successful and the mediating role of emerging social identities in this process is critical. The research seeks ultimately to provide a conceptual basis for the development of innovative teaching practices that capitalise on diversity, enhancing students' preparation for professional practice. Theoretical understandings may be applied to other contexts of intercultural interaction, helping researchers and practitioners to understand and build the bases for social cohesion in diverse societies.

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Biographies

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Simone Volet is Professor of Educational Psychology. Her research focuses on: the integration of cognitive, metacognitive, motivational and social aspects of learning at university and other adult learning settings; effective collaborative learning in student-led group activities at university; social dynamics of group work; learning and teaching in culturally diverse contexts; social cohesion on multicultural campuses; and the internationalisation of higher education curricula. She has published numerous book chapters and articles in international and national peer-refereed journals and co-edited a book in the EARLI Series *Advances in Learning and Instruction, Motivation in Learning contexts: Theoretical advances and methodological implications* (Elsevier, 2001). She currently serves as a member of several international editorial Boards as well as several international and national scientific research advisory Boards.