

Enhancing Academics' Capability to Engage Multicultural Classes and Internationalize at Home

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This paper reports the rationale, design, implementation, and outcomes of a strategic diversity course for developing the intercultural capability of academic staff at an Australian university. The interactive workshop called "Engaging and Building Alliance across Cultures" aims at developing awareness of and practical skills in facilitating the inclusion of culturally and linguistically diverse students in the classroom, while also engaging local students in internationalization at their home university. This paper reports the participating academics' workshop ratings, as well as their learning reflections regarding curriculum development, strategies that they intended to apply to engage their culturally diverse classes, and the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the workshop. Implications for the potential use of cultural diversity training to internationalize learning and teaching in a higher education environment are discussed, along with suggestions for future research.

Current trends towards increases in international student enrolments and the number of overseas-born in the general population, have given rise to increasing cultural diversity in the tertiary student population in developed countries. Among Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, Australia has the highest proportion of international students in tertiary programs, with the number of international higher education students growing by a factor of 12 between 1985 and 2006 (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). From 2007 to 2008 alone, the number of onshore international student enrolments in the Australian higher education sector grew by 5% to 182,770, with all of the top five sources being Asian countries (Australian Education International, 2009). In the general population, the proportion born overseas also rose from 23.1% to 23.9% between the 2001 and 2006 Australian censuses (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2009).

In Australia and other developed nations, demographic trends fuel the forces of globalisation and have prompted various universities to plan and action an agenda of internationalization, especially that of the curriculum. Encouragingly, an institutional strategic focus on internationalization has been found to be useful for internationalization (Elkin, Farnsworth, & Templar, 2008), whereas an internationalized education, or internationalization at the home university, would also benefit domestic students (Parsons, 2009).

According to Stella and Liston's (2008) report on the Australian University Quality Agency (AUQA) audit of internationalization of Australian universities, the interpretation of the term "internationalisation" is variable and often not well understood by staff and students. Nevertheless, a widely accepted working definition of internationalization is one by Knight (2003), that it "is the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the

purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education" (Stella & Liston, p. 8). The sector has paid increasing attention to internationalization, and universities generally have an internationalization strategy with varying foci, such as internationalization of the curriculum. At the time of writing, internationalization of the curriculum is a critical component of the University of Canberra's strategic plan for internationalization. The University of Canberra (UC) has also identified "forging linkages between cultures: (enhancing) intercultural student and staff capability" as one of the five signature sub-themes of learning and teaching at UC, embedded in the overarching primary theme of "preparing professionals professionally".

While international and global dimensions of internationalization tend to be better understood and can be embedded into the curriculum with relative ease, intercultural perspectives and skills are often harder to grasp and less readily incorporated into curriculum design and renovation (Mak & Kennedy, under review). However, the cultivation of intercultural capability (including sensitivity, engagement, and competence) among university staff and students is both instrumental to and an outcome of an internationalized curriculum (Leask, 2008, 2009). Growing academics' intercultural capability is essential for engaging and including students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in the classroom, and for developing an internationalized outlook and global citizenship in all students (Otten, 2003; Stone, 2006; Ward, 2006).

Intercultural communication barriers due to cultural and linguistic differences are very real in Australian university classrooms, as indicated by research findings on disappointingly low levels of meaningful interactions and friendships between international and local students (Battye & Mak, 2008; Mak, 2009; Smart, Volet, & Ang, 2000). Teachers face many challenges of teaching diverse students and

engaging multicultural classes, and can benefit from strategic training and support, including in-service professional development of diversity knowledge, attitudes, and skills (Ho, Holmes, & Cooper, 2004; McAllister & Irvine, 2000; Stone, 2006). Effective internationalization at the institutional level cannot happen without assisting individual teachers to internationalize their personal and professional outlooks and develop their own intercultural competence, which often involve self-reflective processes (McAllister & Irvine, 2000; Sanderson, 2008).

Diversity training (or intercultural training with a diversity education focus) for academic staff could enhance their intercultural sensitivity, engagement, and competence, which could in turn improve the classroom participation of international, immigrant, and indigenous students and enhance all higher education students' intercultural learning. Kulik and Roberson's (2008) review of diversity education initiatives in academic and organizational settings has revealed consistent positive effects of diversity education internationally. Regardless of differences in trainee characteristics (e.g., age and employment status) or intervention characteristics (e.g., length and content of diversity education), diversity education is useful for improving trainees' knowledge and overall attitudes towards diversity.

Despite numerous debates on the meanings of internationalization and what constitutes intercultural effectiveness for students and teachers within the Australian higher education sector, there is a paucity of literature addressing the "how to" in the development of intercultural competence (Freeman et al., 2009). The documentation and evaluation of diversity training for Australian academic staff as a practical approach to internationalize learning and teaching, is strangely lacking. Freeman et al.'s national road show seminars have focused on disseminating a cognitive framework for embedding intercultural competence in the curriculum rather than providing hands-on professional skills development for academic staff. However, Freeman et al.'s report (p. 27) has identified three existing practical resources for actively developing intercultural competence, one of which being Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership (EXCELL).

EXCELL was originally developed as a personal development and learning support program for international and immigrant students, and described by its Australian and Canadian co-developers in Mak, Westwood, Barker, and Ishiyama (1998). It is a structured intercultural training system built on an integrated model of learning paradigms incorporating cultural experiential learning (Mak, Westwood, et al., 1999).

According to Kolb and Kolb (2005), experiential learning theory is based on core propositions of

learning that emphasize learning and relearning as an active and holistic process involving synergetic transformation between the person and the environment, and the creation of knowledge enhanced by dealing with conflict, difference, and disagreement. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model delineates the four cyclical stages integral to this active learning approach – concrete experience, observation and reflection, abstract generalization, and experimentation with new behaviors and perceptions. Pedagogy using experiential learning strategies could engage university students, enhance their student experience, and bring about deep learning outcomes (Barber, 2007). Experiential learning methods are also important for accommodating differing preferred styles in learning and communication in multicultural classes (Ho et al., 2004).

EXCELL targets the development of generic social competencies that many learners would find challenging in crossing cultures. One such competency is participation in a group (Mak & Barker, 2006). A vital part of the EXCELL training system is the Alliance Building tool (essentially a strategic approach to facilitating a multicultural group), which aims to validate culturally diverse participants' original cultural identity, build safety and trust, and encourage every group member to listen and contribute to meaningful exchanges in group settings.

Evaluation studies of the complete EXCELL Program in Canada, the UK, New Zealand, and Australia have shown intercultural learning benefits for both local and overseas-born students (Mak, Barker, Logan, & Millman, 1999; Ho, et al., 2004), and that it can be fully embedded into the curriculum in some multicultural classes (Mak & Buckingham, 2007; Woods, Barker, & Daly, 2004). An EXCELL Train-the-Trainer course normally requires three full days of intensive facilitator training, and will suit teachers, counselors, and other helping professionals seeking accreditation to deliver the entire EXCELL Program to assist clients with the development of the full range of EXCELL competencies using all of the EXCELL tools, usually over six group sessions of two to three hours. However, resources for staff training and allocation of class time vary across institutions and courses. Many university teachers may only want or need to attend a one-day staff training course on cultural diversity, especially when it is designed to enhance their intercultural capability to manage classroom diversity.

Training on Engaging and Building Alliance across Cultures

Recently, the author designed and trialed a single-day diversity course for academic staff at the University of Canberra (UC), which includes the use

of the EXCELL Alliance Building tool to engage multicultural classes. The resulting interactive psycho-educational course was a full-day workshop called “Engaging and Building Alliance across Cultures.” The workshop was designed to provide diversity training to teaching staff to build the University’s capacity to implement its strategic plan in relation to internationalization, and also its learning and teaching signature theme of intercultural competence.

The diversity training aims at increasing teaching staff’s awareness of the cultural values underpinning diverse students’ classroom behaviours, and enhancing understanding about conditions for positive intercultural contact. Additionally, the workshop promotes the development and sharing of practical skills in effective intercultural communication, and engages staff in applying the principles and methods of cultural validation and alliance building. An emphasis of the training is on promoting teachers’ empathy with diverse students’ difficulties in participation in groups in academic settings, and what the teachers can do to facilitate the inclusion of these students in learning activities.

Learning outcomes of the Engaging and Building Alliance workshop pertain to increased awareness and knowledge in several general cross-cultural domains. They are: reality and benefits of cultural diversity, challenges for students and teachers, the EXCELL framework for developing social competencies, dimensions of cultural differences, conditions for positive intercultural contact, reduction of barriers in intercultural communication, the EXCELL tool for cultural validation and alliance building, strategies and practical skills for engaging and including students from culturally diverse backgrounds in groups, and enhancing all students’ cross-cultural perspective.

A range of active learning methods was employed in the delivery of this diversity workshop for academic staff - experiential learning, a cultural assimilator exercise, demonstration of inclusive practices in a facilitated group, dyadic and small group discussion, and critical reflections. The active learning was supplemented by segments of direct teaching drawing on the relevant literature on theory, research, and practice. Course handouts included a copy of the PowerPoint slides for the course, three key articles on the EXCELL rationale and tools (Mak & Barker, 2004, 2006; Mak, Westwood, et al., 1999), and a list of useful readings and websites relevant to the workshop content. The research findings presented in this paper, which include participating academic staff’s critical reflections, provide an evaluation of the pilot trial of this diversity course at UC.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants of the initial program evaluation were 16 academic staff members at the University of Canberra who participated in one of two deliveries of a one-day course on Engaging and Building Alliance across Cultures@UC. The academics were teaching staff from a range of disciplines across the university, including accounting, architecture, communication, environmental science, graphics design, industrial design, management, midwifery, nursing, politics, and psychology. There was a mix of genders, birthplaces, cultural backgrounds, and length of service within the university.

The research participants had responded earlier to invitations to attend the workshop, either as associates (eight participants) with a UC teaching project on Internationalising the Student Experience (see Mak, DePercy, & Kennedy, 2008; Mak & Kennedy, under review) or as part of a UC initiative on equity and diversity advertised through the faculties (which attracted another eight participants for a second offering of the workshop). At the end of the one-day course, workshop participants were invited to complete an anonymous and confidential two-page workshop evaluation survey on a voluntary basis, which took about 10 minutes to complete. There was no demographic question on the evaluation form to identify the participants.

Evaluation Questions

The workshop evaluation form surveyed the participating academic staff members’ ratings of and critical reflections on the training. Program ratings were assessed with items on the evaluation of various aspects of the workshop and also as a whole, on 5-point rating scales, where 1 = Poor, 2 = Fair, 3 = Average, 4 = Good, and 5 = Excellent.

The participants’ reflections on the training were assessed using open-ended questions on their learning on curriculum development, intended application for engaging culturally diverse classes, the most useful parts of the workshop, suggestions for improvements, and whether (if yes, to whom, and why) they would recommend the workshop to others.

Results

Workshop Ratings

Table 1 presents the academic staff ratings of the workshop. On scales of 1 to 5, all aspects of the workshop attracted mean ratings of “Good” (a rating of

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Workshop Ratings by Academics

Aspect of workshop	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Workshop activities	4.16	.89
Course materials	4.25	.68
Degree of enjoyment of workshop	4.34	.87
Overall evaluation of workshop	4.31	.70
Workshop's value for professional development	4.25	.84

Note. Possible ratings ranged from 1 = Poor to 5 = Excellent.

“4”) to “Excellent” (“5”). The participants were generally very positive about the workshop overall and found it enjoyable, noting its value for their professional development. There was also very favourable feedback about the workshop activities and course materials.

Learning and Curriculum Development

Academic staff gave a range of responses to an open-ended question on one's learning on curriculum development that they are taking away from the workshop. One recurrent theme was regarding teaching pedagogy (five mentions), with such reflections as “establishing group rapport early on with ice-breaker activities”; “need to consider student characteristics when designing content and process of teaching”; and, “methods of getting culturally diverse students to participate in tutes.”

Another recurrent theme was on teaching philosophy (four mentions). Learning around this theme includes heightened awareness about cultural diversity, with comments like “we need to be aware of the diversity in our cohort of students and allow curriculum design to reflect this” and “I am more aware of the challenges ... (of) ever more multicultural student body and the need for academics to improve their teaching towards these students.” While some academic staff's learning was around curriculum content (four mentions), expressed as “adding cultural perspectives in examples and case studies,”; “use more inclusive examples/content for discussion”; and, “issues of values and stereotypes.” One other teacher's learning was specifically on assessment methods, “devise assessments that equalise student capacities to do well” (e.g., choice of written or oral assignments). For one teacher, the learning was about CALD or “Culturally and Linguistically Diverse” as a new term.

Intended Applications to Engage Culturally Diverse Classes

Most academic staff's responses to the open-ended question on one strategy that they are intending to apply

to engage culturally diverse classes could be classified as inclusive practices (13 mentions). These were sometimes explicitly linked with values of equity. Common types of inclusive practices mentioned were planning to offer more small group activities, validate different cultural practices, and using diversity within the class as a resource. Examples of these intended applications are “get(ing) small group members to contribute their cultural expertise”; “tailoring some activities to better engage CALD students and to get these students working with the Australian students”; “good, friendly introduction strategies that validate difference and set the tone for the semester's work”; and, “I will try to present more case studies showing diverse answers to a problem, according to different cultures.” One particularly interesting intended inclusive practice is “asking students for their individual experience and then exploring the underlying values and beliefs to see how the way things are done in other cultures are different yet the same.”

Two other academic staff stated a specific inclusion technique - that of inviting students to participate in class activities - as their intended applications.

Most Useful Parts of Workshop

Academic staff expressed a range of opinions on what constituted the most useful parts of the workshop. One recurrent theme pertains to discussion, sharing and listening to others' experiences (eight mentions). One academic described this as “the chance to hear challenges and solutions to a range of interesting situations,” whereas others stated “networking, sharing teaching experience and listening to different ways of solving the same problems,” and “I really enjoyed the wide discussion and debate and hearing other teachers' experiences with diverse student groups.”

Other staff found opportunities for networking and meeting particular individuals to be the most useful parts of the workshop (five mentions). Two teachers described what they had found useful in terms of “interacting with CALD academics” and “networking and getting ideas from others. Being more aware of what it is like to be new to a ... culture.”

Other responses to the most useful parts of the workshop could be summarised as handouts and readings (four mentions), practical teaching strategies, tips and applications (three mentions), and learning about theory and research in some depth (one mention). One respondent simply said “all.”

Suggestions for Improving the Workshop

There were different opinions on how the workshop could be improved, apart from the technology problems at the beginning of the second time the course was run. Two academic staff would prefer a faster paced, half-day workshop, whereas four others would want a longer course allowing more time for a greater number of and more in-depth activities and case studies. There was also a suggestion each for a more discipline-specific dialogue, greater coverage on theory (such as operating paradigms of cultural diversity), and pre-course readings of summary materials. The remaining four academics simply found the workshop to be a valuable experience.

Recommendations of Workshop to Others

All the respondents said they would recommend the workshop to someone, particularly to their colleagues (“all staff,” and “all our lecturers and tutors”), including senior academics and administrators, to broaden their perspectives in multicultural Australian society. One comment was that this workshop should be seen as equal value to the Disability Standards Workshop, which is mandatory for staff at the University.

Case Illustration of Application of Diversity Training to Teaching

A participant of the University’s teaching project on Internationalising the Student Experience has reported and analysed, to considerable breadth and depth, her subsequent application of the one-day diversity course, to her unit on Introduction to Management, a multicultural class with over 300 enrolments (Mak, DePercy, & Kennedy, 2008). She has incorporated Alliance Building activities throughout her renovated tutorial program to encourage greater social integration and to deepen students’ understanding of the international context in which they would develop their careers. Drawing on reflections from her tutors and students, she observed that the diversity training has provided the tools and impetus for teachers and students to engage in cultural experiential learning that links management theory with practice.

Discussion

The quantitative feedback received from university teachers participating in a facilitated one-day diversity course on Engaging and Building Alliance across Cultures, suggests that this type of diversity training is welcome by academic staff regardless of their disciplinary and demographic backgrounds. The preliminary findings show consensus in favorable ratings of workshop activities, course materials, and, importantly, degree of enjoyment of the workshop, overall evaluation of the workshop, and its value for professional development.

Thematic analyses of the participants’ responses to open-ended questions have provided a deeper understanding of what the academics found useful. Their learning reflections suggest a self-reported increase in awareness and practical skills in curriculum development with an intercultural competence focus. On completion of the workshop, the teachers expressed that they could take away learning regarding teaching philosophy, pedagogy, and curriculum content. This learning centered around an increased understanding of the interpersonal dynamics in culturally diverse classes, a heightened sensitivity to the needs of culturally diverse students, methods to encourage culturally diverse students’ participation, and practical ways of incorporating cultural perspectives in learning materials and activities.

Participating academics’ critical reflections have further suggested insight into the rationale and knowhow of inclusive classroom practices. Almost all the participants expressed an intention to apply strategic inclusive practices in learning and teaching to engage students and embed internationalization at home. Common types of inclusive practices include offering a greater number of small group activities that encourage intercultural interactions, inviting culturally diverse students to participate in active learning, validating different cultural practices, and using diversity within the class as a resource to teach international perspectives. An interesting observation is that some teachers’ intended applications are explicitly driven by values of equity and diversity.

Post-workshop reflections indicate that the majority of academics found the interactive nature of the professional development to be the most useful part of the workshop. The participants had particularly enjoyed discussion in groups that also happened to represent several dimensions of diversity (e.g., in gender, ethnic backgrounds, years of teaching experience, and disciplinary affiliation). The format of the facilitated workshop encourages networking, as well as the sharing of personal and professional experiences and strategies around the topic of cultural

diversity and the opportunities and challenges that it presents.

In contrast, there were varied opinions on how to improve the workshop. Several participants expressed a desire for a longer course allowing more time for a greater number of and more in-depth activities and case studies; but a couple of academics would prefer a faster-paced, half-day workshop.

Overall, the quantitative and qualitative feedback obtained is aligned with the aims of the cultural diversity workshop. While the workshop evaluation involved only a relatively small sample size and had not included pre-workshop measures, the teacher participants reported clearly favorable experiences with the facilitated interactive diversity course. There are indications of increased awareness of diverse cultural values, empathy with culturally diverse students' difficulties in participation in academic settings, and understanding of conditions for positive intercultural engagement and what teachers can do to facilitate this in multicultural classes. A case study reported by one of the participating academics in management, indicates how cultural diversity training could provide both the impetus and the practical tools for curriculum renewal aimed at engaging multicultural classes while at the same time facilitating internationalizing at the home university.

This one-day diversity sensitivity and engagement course for academic staff in one Australian university, represents one step towards addressing what Freeman et al. (2009) see as a gap in the "how to" literature on strategically building the intercultural capability of academics to develop their students' intercultural competence. Indeed, Eisenclas and Trevaskes (2007) have proposed that real-life intergroup interactions and the use of experiential methods constitute a preferred vehicle for developing intercultural skills.

Implications for Future Training and Research

Interactive professional development workshops, such as the Engagement Workshop reported in this paper, are likely to provide an effective format for encouraging academics to experience the dynamics of diversity firsthand and subsequently develop strategic inclusive teaching practices to engage culturally diverse students and enhance local students' internationalization at home (see also McAllister & Irvine, 2000; Sanderson, 2008). Feedback from participants in this study suggests the need to offer professional development of varied lengths. This may be accommodated by having a half-day introductory workshop that focuses on awareness raising. On completion of the introductory half-day module, teachers may wish to complete an intermediate half-day module on the practical knowhow of including and

engaging culturally diverse students. In combination, the modules would familiarize academics with the use of the EXCELL Alliance Building tool.

For academics who are interested to further their intercultural capability using the EXCELL system, there is the further option of attending another day of training to learn to use the EXCELL Cultural Mapping tool, as in the design of the University of Canberra teaching project on Internationalizing the Student Experience (see Mak et al., 2008). Cultural Mapping provides a schematic framework for describing a sequence of micro behaviors (both verbal and nonverbal), which shows one way of navigating effectively in a specified social scenario (Mak et al., 1998; Westwood, Mak, Barker, & Ishiyama, 2000). Where it is deemed appropriate to embed the complete EXCELL Intercultural Program into the curriculum (e.g., incorporated as six 2h tutorials in a unit on interpersonal communication), academics have the option of completing a 3-day EXCELL Train-the-Trainer Course. Generally speaking, more extended types of professional development are required to enhance academics' intercultural capability for preparing graduates who can meet cultural competency standards of professional practice (e.g., in the helping professions) in a rapidly globalizing society (Dana & Allen, 2008).

While the Alliance Building processes represent a generic intercultural training resource and appear to have worked well for most of the teacher participants in the workshop reported in this paper, it may be necessary to adapt the engagement workshop to cater for requirements specific to particular disciplines and types of classes. The most effective design of learning activities and assessment items may depend on curriculum content, the proportion of students from culturally diverse backgrounds, class size, course level, and whether it is a theory or a practicum session. Having international students in the training room in one or more segments of the workshop to share their experiences first hand, could be a powerful addition to diversity training for teachers.

An interesting present finding is a prevalent view that senior academics and administrative staff should also be provided with the diversity training, so as to broaden their perspectives on Australia as a multicultural society. This concurs with Leask's (2009) view that a range of people across education institutions need to engage with the internationalization agenda over time, before any real improvements in interactions between home and international students can happen. Ward (2006) has further pointed out that the rapid increase of onshore international student enrolments has significant impacts on host institutions, but existing support services and research have concentrated mainly on international students, with relatively little attention paid to the impacts on staff and local students.

Future research could focus on improving the methodology of evaluating the outcomes and longer term impact of diversity training with academics. Kulik and Roberson (2008) have identified various unanswered research questions related to the effectiveness of diversity training in improving staff members' knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Ways to improve future evaluations include the use of larger samples, quantitative instruments with sound psychometric properties, the collection and use of pre-training and other benchmarking data, and the conduct of follow-up teacher interviews or focus groups to evaluate the impact on curricular changes and any longer-term change in attitudes towards cultural diversity. Where many academics within a course group have undertaken the same type of professional development, it will be particularly pertinent to capture case studies of good inclusive teaching practices and document systematic changes to the course design and delivery.

Where possible, a comprehensive approach to evaluating the impact of a concerted effort to provide staff members with diversity training, could also include the evaluation of student experience and learning outcomes. These may be assessed in terms of any improvement in students' cultural diversity knowledge, attitudes, and skills, and culturally diverse students' participation in tutorial discussion and other group activities.

Conclusion

The notion of internationalization at home is gaining currency in higher education as the phenomenon of transnational movements of tertiary students and skilled labor has transformed the cultural mix in the classrooms, at a time when the sector has also recognized the need to prepare local-born graduates in a rapidly globalizing workplace. Professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy could increase academic staff's awareness and skills in intercultural competence, and enhance their capability to engage culturally diverse students and facilitate positive intercultural interactions in the classroom. Intercultural engagement and alliance building in classroom interactions would further contribute to internationalizing all students' learning at their home university even where study abroad is not a practical option.

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