

Wiki Ways and Cultural Competency – Enhancing the Student Learning Experience

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Aims

- The aims of this project were to:
- Develop and trial innovative course materials and learning tasks that stimulate cross-cultural student interaction and collaboration in project work using wikis in Blackboard.
- Utilize the newly developed University web-based resources relating to cultural competency in developing new curricula.
- Support national and international collaboration in online postgraduate curriculum design.

Origins and context

- a) The project was prompted by the experience of Family Action Centre staff, Deborah Hartman and Penny Crofts as part of an international consortium developing courses for a proposed innovative online Masters Program in Family Studies. As part of our contribution to this international consortium, the Family Action Centre team has taken responsibility for leadership of the development of an online Masters level course on Families and Cultural Diversity. Students taking this course would be likely to have an interest in working with families from diverse cultural contexts in Australia, such as migrant or refugee families, or be interested in international work with a family focus. In the collaborative course development process for the international program, we worked with staff from five other universities around the world, and were aware of the strengths and challenges of these collaborative cross-cultural processes. We wanted to work in a similar way within the University of Newcastle in order to develop materials and course activities that could mirror this exciting and challenging experience for the students. In order to do this we wanted to trial these processes within the University of Newcastle, collaborating with others to utilise important existing expertise in online learning as well as expertise and materials to support inter-cultural understandings that have been developed here. The development of a multi-disciplinary team with the inclusion of Dr Katherine Butler, Glyn O'Toole and Bob Kucera in the project team was therefore vital to the success of the project.
- b) The development of a national and international online program in Family Studies has not been attempted before and involves a number of complexities not usually encountered together in course development. The program will be interdisciplinary, intercultural and online. The potential students for the program also reflect this diversity in that they will come from a variety of professional contexts, will have diverse undergraduate degrees and diverse employment aspirations upon completion of the program and will also come from a diverse range of countries and cultures. Cross cultural communication is sometimes difficult. Establishing effective online learning communities produces its own challenges. Working with students from a range of discipline areas and employment experiences adds another dimension to effective teaching and learning. Recognising that all three aspects would be relevant to the proposed masters of Family Studies, we wanted to collaboratively develop some trial materials and activities and seek student feedback on the process and the materials so that the final courses that are developed in the program would reflect not only the literature in the field but also an improved practice founded on methodologies tested in this practical trial.
- c) What does the literature tell you about how these needs, problems, or questions might be approached, or how they have been addressed by others?

Two significant trends in higher education are intercultural curriculum and online modes of delivery. The emerging research and teaching resources related to these two trends provide pedagogical advice for those involved in curriculum planning and evaluation at the student, educator, institutional and inter-institutional levels. However, the literature and related resources tend to focus on online or intercultural

instructional theory and practice, rather than their integration. Another limitation of the available literature is the lack of a specific focus on the development of postgraduate course work curricula. This project drew on the respective instructional design theories and processes relating to both online and intercultural learning to inform curriculum development in the field of Family Studies.

Intercultural Curriculum

Intercultural curriculum is a component of a broader trend towards internationalisation of higher education, which has been defined by Knight and cited by Freeman [1] as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education.” Intercultural curriculum is a significant dimension of internationalisation of higher education and involves much more than course content about other cultures and countries [6]. The term is used here to refer to the notion of ‘inclusiveness’ whereby different cultural perspectives are recognised and included in curriculum and delivery, and dialogue is constructed between diverse cultural perspectives in a spirit of reciprocity and mutuality [7].

Intercultural curriculum is understood to be a social practice that takes time to implement and operates at different levels of engagement [7]. Curro and McTaggart [7] suggest there is a continuum of development that involves progression from technical observance (characterised by actions such as recruitment of international students, or international examples in curriculum content) through practical deliberation to critically reflective practice. The online courses being developed by the Family Action Centre support this progression through the collaboration, experimentation and reflection involved in designing the courses.

Internationalisation of the curriculum is recognised as ‘a difficult theoretical, practical and organisational task’[7]. According to Rizvi [8] the goals of this task should be to develop:

- student skills in inquiry and analysis based on the capacity to determine how knowledge is globally linked, regardless of its locally specific uses;
- global imagination arising from an understanding of how knowledge is ‘produced, distributed and utilised globally’; and
- culturally inclusive values and practices based on capacity to explore cultural differences and learn from other cultures.

Achievement of these goals requires changes in the practices of academic staff and their institution. This is illustrated in the framework developed by Freeman [1] directed towards embedding the development of cultural competence in business education. In Freeman’s framework the embedding process involves change across three domains including:

- communities of practice who typically engage in an action research process to generate new knowledge;
- change in policies and procedures to ensure sustainable outcomes; and
- resources and tools that can support the process.

This project has resulted in a multi-disciplinary project team or community of practice that generated new understandings about the complexities of online cross cultural collaboration as well as the development, use and adaption of new and existing resources and tools for online intercultural student experiences.

Online Education

The increased technological capacity for online delivery provides the opportunity to enhance student access to international learning experiences without requiring the financial and personal commitment that prohibits many students from studying abroad. The proposed program in Family Studies is based on educators and students in diverse national and international locations engaging in the teaching and learning process. The current trial of the use of wikis in assessment is designed to examine some of the issues in online intercultural communication by engaging with specific cultural materials in a collaborative way through the online environment.

In light of the growth in online delivery there is an emerging body of research examining online instruction. Tallent-Runnels et al [9] reviewed the available research in accordance with themes

associated with instructional design theory. This review of research points to a range of variables to be considered in online course design and evaluation, including:

- the strategies for effective teacher-student and student-student interaction that promote deeper learning
- the degree of educator control exercised over sequencing of course content and over student self-pacing throughout the course
- the characteristics of the learners in terms of learning style
- understandings relating to teacher and learner roles
- training and experience with teacher and learner use of computer technology
- the type and diversity of instructional tools used to engage learners
- the institutional policies for online delivery relating to technical and training support, course development and evaluation.

Each of these variables was considered by our project team, and online and intercultural learning experts were consulted to address these issues in the context of developing materials for the trial. Participants specifically commented on many aspects of these variables in the evaluation processes.

A Guided Approach to Curriculum Development

Most academics engaged in curriculum development are expert in the contemporary theory and practice in their discipline, but invariably have limited opportunity to learn from and apply knowledge of instructional design theory and research relating to pedagogical trends such as intercultural learning and online delivery. A guided process that identifies and seeks to integrate the key conceptual teaching and institutional practices and challenges associated with both online and intercultural instruction will enhance the planning of meaningful and effective postgraduate student learning experiences across disciplines and institutions. This trial will address these issues on a small scale and apply the learnings to the development of courses in a national and international post-graduate online program.

The literature suggests that such a process will prompt educators to explicitly consider questions such as:

- How do we individually and collectively understand the concept of intercultural learning?
- What are the key instructional practices in design and delivery of effective intercultural and online learning experiences?
- How do we understand the relationship and role of teacher and learner in intercultural and online education?
- What are the desired learning outcomes from intercultural and online learning experiences?
- What variables should be considered in evaluation of intercultural and online learning experiences?
- What are the institutional systems, infrastructure and policies that support intercultural and online learning?
- How does intercultural learning fit into the institution's graduate attribute policy?
- What educational theory is consistent with online and intercultural learning?

Reushle [10] suggests that e-learning settings are conducive to transformative learning which is based on constructivist learning theory. Constructivist learning theory focuses on the active engagement of the learner in a process that constructs meaning through experience, situated cognition and reflection – a process which is also consistent with the goals of intercultural learning. Constructivist learning theory, therefore, provides a unifying theoretical perspective that can guide a parallel learning process for educators engaged in online intercultural curriculum development

Desired Outcomes

Drawing on the “Aims” (above), specify the four or five outcomes you want as a result of this project.

- An interactive Blackboard site available to staff at the university, as one example for those who wish to utilise cross-cultural collaborative materials, learning activities and assessment items.
- Models of a range of assessable items for students applicable to individual journals, group blogs and group collaborative wiki projects for online courses with a focus on cultural competency and cross cultural understandings.
- Documentation of successful collaborative curriculum development processes for adapting and utilizing existing materials and expertise to produce new understandings and materials in cross cultural collaboration and cultural competency.
- An evaluation summary of the trial of the wiki assessment item that will inform the development of assessment items in the Masters in Family Studies courses, particularly the *Families and Cultural Diversity* course.
- Utilization of new learning about collaborative processes in ongoing curriculum development processes in the global consortium developing the International Masters in Family Studies.

Strategies

Several strategies based on the literature and the teaching experience and research and practice expertise of the project team were utilised effectively in the project to ensure that the project outcomes were achieved. The most significant ones were:

- **Cross-disciplinary and Cross-cultural Collaboration** – The formation of a cross-disciplinary, multi-cultural team that drew on the specific skills and expertise of each team member was fundamental to the project's ability to create new knowledge and to develop and trial an online learning site with appropriate materials and activities. All team members significantly contributed to aspects of the collaborative planning, development, delivery and evaluation of the trial materials. The work of this cross disciplinary team achieved the first three outcomes of the project, producing an interactive website that includes the learning activities, materials and assessment items used in the trial, which will be freely available to all University staff.
- **Selection and Adaption of existing high quality materials to specific curriculum contexts and online mode of delivery.** The project has incorporated the selection and use of existing high quality, authentic materials about Indigenous culture developed by Kathy Butler and others, and well- researched cross-cultural communication and reflective questioning tools developed by Gjyn O'Toole, Kathy Butler and others. These excellent resources were adapted and extended for use in the online materials and collaborative online tasks. Through a series of curriculum development meetings, the team designed the online learning resources and assessment items to suit the desired aims and outcomes of the trial, in keeping with the objective of eventually informing the development of an international course on Families and Cultural Diversity. The Blackboard site utilising these curriculum materials and the possibilities for collaboration in the online tools of Learning Journals, Blogs and Wikis was then also collaboratively developed by several members of the project team, led in this task by Bob Kucera, to take advantage of and pass on his online expertise to other team members. Collaboration between team members ensured both the high quality of the materials produced and fostered new learning extending the existing knowledge of cross-cultural competencies and communication through the development of learning and assessment activities specific to the project aims.
- **Inclusion** – The invitation to participate in the trial was circulated widely through course coordinators across a range of programs at the university. The aim was to encourage a small and diverse group of students who were interested in cultural diversity and cross cultural communication and potentially in further study in the field of Family Studies. The project was aiming for a suitable number to ensure group work was possible and diversity across disciplinary interests, cultures, genders, ages, experience in the workforce, and familiarity with online learning. It was anticipated that the trial would include up to six students and four workers from the field, who may be potential masters students in the future. Fifteen people expressed interest in the trial and four people participated in both sessions of the trial. While the participation numbers and cultural diversity was not as great as we had hoped, an acceptable range of diversity in all other areas was achieved and the trial of collaborative group work was successfully implemented. Suggestions for obtaining a greater number and diversity of students

were canvassed during the evaluation process and included timing the trial early in the semester when workload of students is not so high, and having the trial on specific days that suit international students. These suggestions will be taken into account in recruitment for any future projects of this nature.

- **Constructivist learning models** – The multi-disciplinary, multi-cultural team drew on their own experience and expertise to suggest a variety of materials, experiences and tasks for students to interact with so that all learning preferences and experiences were catered for. These included group and individual tasks; visual, audio, interactive web-based and written resources; and the use of a variety of tools on the Blackboard site, such as learning journals, blogs and wikis.

Participants in the trial were invited to choose from a range of personal stories by Aboriginal women from the Nambucca Heads area of NSW. Their interaction with these materials involved coming to an understanding of the cultural, historical, political and economic circumstances surrounding these personal stories as well as reflections on similarities and differences between these and their own personal and cultural circumstances. These reflections were supported by interaction with musical and video representations of Indigenous cultural, political and historical experiences from well-known Australian artists.

Students were then put into random groups to collaboratively construct a report about the materials on line. Elements of constructivist learning models were: creating interactive experiences with the materials; moving from the known to unknown; drawing on personal experience of diverse family, cultural and professional contexts; creating opportunities for personal communication, reflection, evaluation and skill sharing by using available online tools to communicate and collaborate online; allowing for self-paced working through the materials; organised group activities that allowed for skill-sharing of writing, technical, cultural and professional skills; immediate lecturer responsiveness to suggested changes; rigorous yet relaxed evaluation processes that created an equitable learning community where all participant (teacher and learner) suggestions were valued.

Evaluation

The project activities, materials and participation were evaluated through participant learning journals and reflections and an online evaluation survey of individual and group participation. The project processes and participant satisfaction were evaluated through a face to face group guided discussion, similar to a focus group, at the end of each of the two trial sessions. A final discussion at a meeting of the project team will also evaluate the development and delivery process. A summary report of participant comments on the processes and the content of the project will be written to guide future curriculum development of Family Studies courses.

Capacity building

The Blackboard site developed for this trial will be available to all staff, once participant details have been deleted for privacy reasons and will be promoted through the Teaching and Learning Centre web pages.

Once completed in November, a PDF version of The Participation Summary Report will be available on the Family Action Centre website for those interested in developing curricula in Family Studies, cultural diversity, or cross-cultural communication.

The Indigenous materials used in the trial are available on the Wollotuka website by clicking <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/institute/wollotuka/indigenous-online-resources/indigenous-cultural-competency/aboriginal-families.html>

The Cultural Competency materials used are available on the university website.

Indigenous cultural competency material can be found by clicking

<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/institute/wollotuka/indigenous-online-resources/indigenous-cultural-competency/>

Members of the Project Team will consider a collaborative journal article and conference presentation at an appropriate Higher Education conference.

Challenges

Given the teaching and research commitments of the project staff, the timeframe to develop and trial the materials was tight. It was often difficult to find a time when all team members could be present for project meetings and for each team member, including project leaders, to undertake their committed project tasks. Consequently, once project decisions had been made, the time to recruit participants and conduct the trial was short and not at an ideal time in the semester for students. However, personal emails and phone calls, and follow-up reminders resulted in enthusiastic recruiting by interested academics. This ensured that three different degrees in two different faculties were represented in the participants.

An unfortunate unforeseeable difficulty in an outside organisation resulted in a lack of expected participants from outside the university. However, two of the student participants in the trial fortuitously had a great deal of previous experience working in the field.

There were some technical challenges developing the materials in a new version of Blackboard, which were overcome either by the technical expertise of Bob Kucera or by creative use of the available tools on Blackboard.

As with many short term small grants, the funds and time were sufficient to conduct and evaluate the project. But they were insufficient to allow time to write academic journal articles or conference papers associated with the findings. However, all participants feel that the positive experiences and demonstrated successes of the project outweigh any obstacles or difficulties that arose.

References and resources

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