

Chapter 48

Identity, Power, and Discomfort: Developing Intercultural Competence Through Transformative Learning

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ABSTRACT

The development of intercultural competence in higher education students is widely seen as desirable yet the processes involved in this development are not fully understood. This chapter sets out the position that the development of intercultural competence in students is dependent upon their undergoing some shift in their identity by actively engaging in ‘transformative learning’. Focusing on the UK context, the authors contend that this transformational process is fraught with challenges and involves several key psychological and interpersonal factors which are not widely acknowledged (including positioning, cultural voyeurism and repressive tolerance). These can involve acute discomfort for the student as s/he develops a critical awareness of power relations and of their place within them. The chapter concludes that ongoing dialogue and dispute in the context of criticality embedded in the curriculum are necessary to support the student in this transformative learning experience.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are at the forefront of educating and training future professionals who, as students, are increasingly required to study in multicultural settings to equip them to live, work and thrive in a diverse society. Intercultural competence, intercultural sensitivity and cultural awareness are frequently cited as types of knowledge, skills and attitudes that students might learn in order to achieve this (Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Deardoff, 2006; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Spitzberg & Changnon,

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2009). Bramming (2007) and Reid, Dahlgren, Petocz and Dahlgren (2008) suggest that higher education today offers students significant transformative potential both personally and professionally. The development of intercultural competence promises to constitute part of that potential transformation.

Globalisation involves the integration of technology, markets, politics, cultures, labour, production and commerce. It is both a process and a result of this integration (Scholte, 2002). While the positive and negative features of globalisation are widely discussed and debated, its influence on us is undeniable, giving an international dimension to many aspects of our personal and professional lives. Globalisation is noted to be one of the most important contextual factors shaping higher education in the world today leading to the intensified mobility of ideas, students and academic staff and to greater opportunities for learning from diverse individuals (International Association of Universities, 2012). The increasing movement of people globally points to the likelihood that the UK, among other diverse countries, will become a ‘superdiverse’ society (Fanshawe & Sriskandarajah, 2010): that is “the notion intended to underline a level and kind of complexity surpassing anything...” we have ever experienced (Vertovec, 2007, p.1024). As such intercultural competence has been identified as an important attribute to cultivate in university students (Busch, 2009; Deardorff, 2006; Shiel, Williams, & Mann, 2005) to help them contribute to their success as professionals in diverse working environments (Crossman & Clarke, 2010) as well as global citizens who can promote peace and understanding in their communities and the wider world (Haigh, 2008). There is growing evidence to support the view that diversity has an impact on learning as well as on students’ general satisfaction and academic integration (Arieli, Friedman, & Hirschfield, 2012; Gibbs, 2005; Prunuske, Wilson, Walls, & Clarke, 2013).

The literature suggests, then, that interculturalism and intercultural competence have a place within higher education settings. International publications from the Council of Europe (e.g. Bergan & Van’t Land, 2010; Byram, Barrett, Ipgrave, Jackson, & Méndez, 2009) and elsewhere (e.g. Diaz & Dasli, 2016; Lantz & Davies, 2015) indicate its importance in the context of teaching and learning. Some have suggested that “...helping students learn to engage constructively with those who are not like themselves... [is] the single most pressing issue for educators in the 21st century...” (Colburn, 2005, p.2). Despite its acknowledged importance in the literature, little has been done to consider the extent to which these types of knowledge, skills and attitudes are recognised and integrated on university campuses although it is an assumed benefit of higher education. Even though higher education is often taken to be a key vehicle for developing cultural competence and combating social inequalities (Wilson & Macdonald, 2010), increasing diversity on university campuses has brought to the surface a variety of cultural difficulties experienced by staff and students from diverse backgrounds (Dunne, 2009; Harrison & Peacock, 2010; Hopkins, 2011; Hyland, Trahar, Anderson, & Dickens, 2008). These can range from simple miscommunication to instances of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination. Such issues continue to be a problem not just on university campuses but around the world as evidenced by media articles (e.g. Milman, 2015; Park, 2014) and academic research (Bishop, Coupland, & Garrett, 2005; Cameron, 2006). The most extreme negative manifestation of such difficulties can comprise explicit abuse or violence in the form of hate crime, homophobia and racism. In the UK at present there is growing evidence that xenophobia and racism are on the increase following a referendum vote to leave the European Union (referred to as ‘Brexit’). This rise has been reported on university campuses as well as in the wider UK society. Figures released by the National Police Chiefs’ Council in September 2016 showed a 49% rise in hate crime incidents to 1,863 in the last week of July when compared with the previous year (Travis, 2016). The development of students’ intercultural competence may be one strategy to help combat such worrying trends.

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