

Exploring Strategies in Facilitating Cultural Diversity: A Freirean Approach

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The student population in Canada's higher education institutions is becoming increasingly racially and culturally diverse. Canadian higher education has the obligation to build inclusive teaching and learning environments where the needs and aspirations of students from diverse cultures and backgrounds can be addressed in an equitable manner. Using a Freirean approach, this paper aims to develop a process for deriving useful and practical strategies to meet the challenges of creating culturally and linguistically inclusive classroom environments.

Introduction

The student population in Canadian higher education institutions is becoming increasingly racially and culturally diverse, reflecting the greater diversity in Canadian society. This demographic change can be attributed to the growth of the immigrant population as well as increasing enrolment of international students. When immigrant and international students first arrive at a Canadian university or college, they may be faced with a different cultural environment than the one they are accustomed to. If there is a large gap between students' cultural background and the dominant culture of the classroom,

they may feel alienated and isolated. It is the responsibility of Canadian higher education institutions to build an inclusive learning environment where the needs and aspirations of students from diverse cultures and backgrounds can be addressed in an equitable manner.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest a process for deriving useful and practical strategies to meet the challenges of creating culturally and linguistically inclusive classroom environments. This process can be used in professional development workshops for instructors, designed to address issues of teaching and

learning for diversity. Since each classroom environment is unique, rather than presenting a prescriptive cookie-cutter approach or a very broad and general set of strategies for fostering inclusivity, we suggest a process for developing strategies that are relevant to a specific learning situation. This process would take into account the course content being taught by the instructors attending the workshop, the make-up of their student groups, and the instructional skills and experiences of the workshop participants. The process would also consider the particular challenges of the teaching situation. The challenge for educators is to understand how to best create inclusive teaching and learning environments. These inclusive environments can benefit students from majority as well as minority groups.

Outline for a Workshop

The following outline for a workshop is derived from our ongoing work in the area of cultural diversity and inclusive teaching (Guo & Jamal, 2007). Our workshop usually starts with an overview of the changing context of teaching and learning in higher education and the models that are commonly used in addressing cultural diversity in higher education. This provides workshop participants with a good understanding of the context of teaching and learning, the magnitude of cultural diversity, and the theoretical frameworks. Next, workshop participants could brainstorm the issues and challenges that they face when teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. This is an important step because it helps participants become more focused when they begin to explore pedagogical strategies. Finally, participants would work in small groups to develop possible solutions in response to the issues and challenges that they have brainstormed. The workshop could end with participants sharing their specific strategies with the larger group to facilitate the exchange of knowledge. At the end of the workshop, participants would leave with a set of strategies that they can implement, evaluate, and refine to meet the needs of their students, along with suggestions from facilitators.

In designing and conducting the workshops,

we used Freire's pedagogical principles of problem posing, cooperative learning, dialogical engagement, and learning through praxis (Freire, 1970). The use of these principles will facilitate the creation of new knowledge based on the existing skills and experiences of workshop participants, and build on that knowledge to address new contexts and challenges. We would try to avoid using the banking model of education, which treats learners as empty vessels to whom instructors deposit information. We hope that this outline for a workshop will be useful to faculty members as well as instructional designers and faculty development staff who are interested in building their knowledge and expertise in regard to issues of diversity within the scholarship of teaching and learning.

The changing context of teaching and learning in higher education

The first step in the workshop is to outline the context in which change can be created in educational settings, and to remind participants of the components of the teaching and learning environment to be considered when implementing change.

The challenge of promoting cultural diversity in higher education settings can be addressed by promoting change at different levels. These include change at the individual level of attitudes towards difference and diversity, in the classroom environment, at the level of the institution as well as at the broader level of the community (Kitano, 1997). Sustainable and long term change has to be implemented across all four levels, and change at each of these levels has to be created within the context of change at the other levels. The workshop we propose focuses on developing strategies for creating change in the classroom environment, while keeping in mind the importance of changes at all levels.

Changes in the classroom environment can be created by considering the four components of the teaching and learning environment: the students, the instructor, course content, and teaching strategies (Marchesani & Adams, 1992). A starting point for creating an inclusive environment is to understand the changing demographics and the diverse needs,

interests, and backgrounds of students. Students may have different educational experiences, values and beliefs, and conceptions of what is worth knowing, from students of the dominant culture. Instructors' values, beliefs, and attitudes toward difference and diversity can also have a considerable impact on how students feel in the classroom, and how they engage with course content. Course content should incorporate diverse social and cultural perspectives and reflect the needs and interests of all students. Teaching strategies can play a crucial role in transforming classrooms into sites that both respect diversity and motivate students to learn.

A review of theoretical models

The next step in the workshop is to present participants with some useful theoretical models which address issues of diversity in the classroom. A detailed description of these models can be found in the STLHE Green Guide, *Cultural Diversity and Inclusive Teaching* (Guo & Jamal, 2007). Participants can consider either one model or a combination of models, depending on their objectives and the specific issues and challenges that they would like to address.

The first model is an intercultural education model that focuses on an individual's awareness and acceptance of difference and diversity. The model provides a process for a transformation of attitudes and can be used by educators to reflect on their own development as well as encourage and assist this process of development in their students. The model is useful in deriving instructional strategies that can help people to accept, value, and validate difference in others.

The second model is a multicultural education model, and is broader in scope. This model is premised on the view that students come to the learning environment with diverse backgrounds and needs, and that curriculum and teaching practices should respond to this diversity. This model addresses issues of individual difference, suggests strategies for responding to these differences in the classroom, provides ways of integrating new content into the curriculum, and highlights issues of knowledge construction.

The third model is a holistic and integrated anti-racist education model that addresses not only

difference at the individual and classroom level, but also at the level of the institution and the community, and focuses on broader issues of promoting social justice and equity. This model emphasizes that meaningful change can only occur when barriers to inclusive education are challenged and addressed at all levels at which they occur.

These three models have different spheres of influence – the intercultural model at the individual level, the multicultural model at the individual and classroom level and the last, the anti-racist model, at the levels of the self, classroom, institution, and community. These models suggest ways in which each of the components of the teaching and learning environment can be transformed and used in different contexts in order to derive useful practices and strategies for inclusive classrooms. The intercultural model can be used to help students and instructors become more aware of an individual's complex identity and gain a better understanding of the many kinds of difference we encounter in our lives. The model provides suggestions for activities and experiences which would promote and encourage cognitive, affective, and behavioral attitudes towards difference. The multicultural model provides a framework for diversifying and enhancing curriculum content and pedagogical strategies so that they are relevant to students from different backgrounds and with a variety of experiences. This model suggests methods and strategies that can be used to either supplement or enhance course materials in order to provide alternate perspectives, to recognize the process of knowledge production, to acknowledge the validity of non-Eurocentric sources of knowledge, and to adjust instructional strategies and practices, all of which can contribute to a more inclusive learning culture in higher education. Like the previous two models, the anti-racist model includes strategies for creating change at the individual level and classroom level, but suggests how these changes can be extended to the institution and community.

Issues and challenges in a diverse classroom

The theoretical models reviewed in the previous step

of the workshop provide a starting point for examining how teaching and learning environments can be enhanced to promote cultural diversity in the classroom. However, this endeavour has to be embedded within a specific teaching context, since each environment will have its own set of challenges and appropriate responses. In the next step of the workshop, participants could work in groups to brainstorm the issues and challenges they have faced when teaching in a linguistically and culturally diverse classroom. The groups could be randomly assigned or based on some commonality within participants, e.g. course content. Some questions that participants can ask themselves to guide the discussion are: what are the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of my students? What challenges have I faced in responding to these differences? Are my teaching methods and strategies working, and do they respect and encourage diversity? How relevant is my course content to my students, and does it incorporate the perspectives and world views of minority groups?

This activity uses a Freirean problem posing approach to examine the specific challenges in each environment (Freire & Shor, 1987). This approach begins with asking questions rather than providing answers, and builds on existing knowledge, skills, and experiences through discussion and debate. The knowledge that instructors possess about teaching and learning is a valuable repository to draw from, and the problem posing method allows instructors to build on this repository by creating a space for reflection about their practice, and to see this practice in a more critical light. Giroux (1988) describes this as a process of “learning how to renew a form of self-knowledge through an understanding of the community and culture that actively constitutes the lives of one’s students” (p. 73).

Developing strategies to respond to challenges

In the next step of the workshop, participants take the list of issues and challenges developed in the previous activity and develop a set of strategies to respond to these challenges. As a starting point, participants can be provided with some categories of strategies that

can be used in instructional settings. These categories include: (1) creating a positive classroom environment that is inclusive of all students; (2) diversifying curriculum content to make it more relevant and meaningful; and (3) using appropriate instructional and assessment strategies and activities for learning (Guo & Jamal, 2007). Participants can then be asked to think of specific strategies within these categories that could be used to respond to the challenges they have faced, and to develop a list of these strategies. The workshop could end with each group sharing their list of strategies with the larger group to facilitate the exchange of knowledge about the variety of ways in which cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom can be addressed.

The activities in this step of the workshop use the pedagogical practices of discussion and dialogic engagement with other instructors and promote cooperative learning. Dialogic engagement requires a process for jointly engaging with and co-investigating the object of knowledge. It is based on the assumption that this knowledge is never complete, but can be re-created to include new situations and contexts. Existing knowledge can be re-learned in the company of others who share the same object of knowledge (Mayo, 2004), which in this case, is a set of strategies for creating inclusive classrooms. Dialogical spaces are not isolated spaces, but take into account the social, cultural, and political context with which these spaces reside. In a workshop on teaching for cultural diversity, this context would be the context of the classroom as well as the institution and broader community in which the classroom is situated. Freire and Shor (1987) suggest that by participating in a dialogic space and by “reflecting together on what we know and don’t know, we can then act critically to transform reality” (p. 99).

Discussion and Conclusions

The workshop can be concluded with a discussion of how new strategies can be implemented in the classroom. Workshop participants can be asked to share ideas on how these strategies are selected, put into practice, and evaluated. The process of creating inclusive classrooms is an iterative one, and instructors will have reflected on an ongoing basis on

what strategies are most effective, and why. Freire has defined the process of praxis as being the back and forth movement between action and reflection, to achieve the goal of transformative action (Mayo, 2004). Within this process, the relationship between theory and practice is dialectical. On the one hand, theory can be applied to practice; and on the other hand, practice can in turn be used to inform and extend theory. This conception of praxis can be used to transform classroom environments to sites which respect, validate, and foster diversity. Instructors can use existing theories of difference and diversity to develop and implement practical strategies for creating inclusive classrooms. These strategies can be tested in the classroom, and through a process of reflection, instructors can determine their effectiveness. The knowledge gained through reflection can then be used to modify theories and frameworks, and to further refine the strategies.

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