Intercultural Competence in Universities

Improving the intercultural competence of university graduates through exposure to Indigenous Curricula is receiving major focus across Australian universities. For educators teaching Indigenous material, while excitement and challenges are often experienced in the classroom, the potential associated with teaching Indigenous content & affecting changes within the university system is powerful. Building capacity within these educators to develop their intercultural leadership potential is crucial to support not only curricula, but system level change.

Led by Prof Kim Scott, a team (A/Prof Dawn Bessarab, Dr Marion Kickett, Dr Julie Hoffman, Dr Angela Durey, A/Prof Sue Jones, A/Prof Simon Forrest, Kate Taylor, Karen Reys and Dr Judy Katzenellenbogen) at Curtin University, in collaboration with an expert internal and external consultative body, is undertaking a project funded by the Office of Teaching & Learning (OLT) called Working Together to design, trial, evaluate and refine a Model that develops intercultural leadership capabilities in Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators teaching Indigenous material.

The project outcomes will include an intercultural framework for academic leadership to build capacity in educators to work collaboratively with a diversity of students. This Intercultural Academic Leadership Program (IALP) will develop a cohort of Indigenous and non-Indigenous intercultural teaching and learning leaders to deliver high quality learning experiences in a core first year unit in Indigenous Culture and Health at Curtin. The model will also develop an inter-cultural, interdisciplinary, cross- institutional Community of Practice (CoP) to support and promote cultural safety and embed intercultural teaching and learning knowledge for educators and students. A key element informing the design and content of the IALP is acknowledgement and application of Indigenous Australian epistemology.

Participants of the first IALP and the Working Together Team, June 2012
The Intercultural Academic Leadership Program

In June 2012, eighteen Indigenous and non-Indigenous academic educators involved in delivering the core Health Science unit, Indigenous Culture and Health 130, participated in a pilot delivery of the IALP. Consisting of six modules delivered over 3 days, the IALP is designed to build intercultural leadership skills and confidence in educators. The modules include:

- Understanding intercultural leadership capabilities
- Facilitating discussions in the intercultural space
- Courageous conversations about race
- Professional, inter-personal & teaching skills and strategies
- Tools and strategies for self-care.

In the highly interactive sessions, participants had the opportunity to reflect, draw on and share their experiences, knowledge and skills as well as discuss challenges and solutions in relation to working with students in the intercultural space.

The importance of self-reflection was demonstrated through the use of journaling in the teaching context and the application of Mindfulness was encouraged as a strategy to help educators, and subsequently their students, build self-care skills. Mindfulness is a useful and effective strategy that educators can use when faced with a challenging situation. It guides practitioners to pause and reflect, before automatically reacting to a difficult situation.

Post-evaluation of the IALP identified the value of talking and thinking about change and resistance in students; clarifying techniques to manage challenging issues; and sharing experiences of teaching practice and strategies. The importance of providing ongoing support to collectively mentor participants and facilitate ‘collegial time together’ that could underpin and help sustain a CoP was also identified.

Intercultural Educators & the Need for Specialized Teaching & Learning Skills

Inter-cultural education is a specialised area in learning and teaching that requires particular skills. Teaching culture and health from an Indigenous perspective presents challenges given Australia’s dominant historical discourse that privileges an Anglo-Australian view of history that, in school curriculum fails to adequately represent an Indigenous perspective on the “settlement” of Australia and its creation as a nation state. International research shows that marked improvements in Indigenous health can be enhanced through using culturally appropriate recruitment, retention and support strategies to increase the involvement of Indigenous peoples in education programs and health care delivery. Overseas experience has also shown that strategies to provide non-Indigenous health professionals with appropriate education about Indigenous issues and health care also contributes positively to the health status of Indigenous peoples.

Intercultural Educators as Leaders

Prof Scott commented that these intercultural educators are leaders in the intercultural space delivering to about 2000 interdisciplinary and intercultural undergraduate students per year. The powerful impact of teaching Indigenous material to mainstream students not only in terms of increasing student cultural awareness but also effecting system changes means this group – and those working in similar spaces in other educational settings - are Intercultural Leaders.

Where to Now?

The Working Together project team is currently designing the final module “Organisational Leadership in the Inter-cultural Space” as part of a strategy to enhance career prospects for such educators and connect them with leadership at the organisational level to support influence and change at an institutional level. Module 6 is pitched for delivery in early November 2012. The project team is also planning a half day symposium at the end of 2012 to support the dissemination and transferability of the IALP across contexts and universities, as well as presenting the Framework and IALP at education conferences around Australia in 2013.

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