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1. Introduction

No-one involved in tertiary education over the past few decades would have failed to have noticed the dramatic and multifaceted transformations of the circumstances in which we teach. The trends towards privatization and commodification of education have been well documented, but equally significant is the transformation of the student body that has been brought about by intersecting global social, cultural and political developments. In Australia, the postwar immigration program, the expansion of tertiary education, and the globalization of education have combined to present us with classrooms comprised of ever larger numbers of students, many of whom are second-generation migrants and/or first-generation tertiary students.

This new demographic has thrown up a number of challenges for teachers in universities. We now routinely encounter by students struggling to make the transition to university learning and life, at least in part because the social and cultural 'diversity' they embody is experienced as an obstacle to learning. Many first-generation tertiary students acutely feel their unfamiliarity with the workings of 'the system', and increasing numbers are struggling with the basic academic skills required for tertiary study, while students from ethnic minorities are often confronted with cultural assumptions embedded in curriculum content and discussion, but rarely explicitly addressed.

Against this background, a small project was undertaken in the sociological program of La Trobe University in 2005 to develop and evaluate teaching practices which could make a difference for such students. Entitled *Developing Social and Cultural Diversity as a Pedagogical Resource*, the project was premised on the assumption that the social and cultural diversity that is often experienced as a barrier to learning is also potentially a rich pedagogical resource.[1] Its primary aim was to develop and trial teaching strategies which take into account students' diverse social and cultural backgrounds, and use this diversity itself to enrich the curriculum and heighten student engagement with the curriculum.

The project was undertaken in conjunction with a second and third year sociology subject in the sociology program of the School of Social Sciences, and funded by the Higher Education Equity Program. The immediate impetus for the project was the presence of a cohort of students, including some of NESB, who were struggling with a theory-based subject in first semester (*Gender and Sexuality*), and it was put together under tight time constraints for implementation in a related but more research-oriented subject on *Families and Change* in second semester. It was shaped in the first instance by reflection on long teaching experience and the immediate needs of this particular cohort of students, but a systematic (albeit largely implicit) theoretical framework underlay its conception. This paper makes that framework explicit, and

draws on the experience of the project to reflect upon its potential for application more widely.

2. The Project

The primary locus of the project was a designated tutorial open to students from all equity groups (disability, low socio-economic background, non-English-speaking background and rural and isolated areas). In the first week of semester, questionnaires were administered to all students enrolled in the subject to ascertain details of social and cultural background, as well as students' self-assessment of their adjustment to university study, and interest in participating in a tutorial dedicated to trialing some new teaching strategies. Thirteen interested students who met the criteria of at least one of the 'equity groups' joined the project.[2]

Focus groups were conducted at the beginning and end of the semester. In the first, the students' cultural, social and family backgrounds, their previous educational experience, and their adjustment to the intellectual and social demands of tertiary education were elicited. In line with the primary concerns of the project participants were asked to talk about their social, cultural and religious backgrounds, with a particular focus on their own and their parents' educational achievements and aspirations. The teaching staff initiated the process in order to provide a model (and in particular, a sociological framework and vocabulary) that the students could draw upon. The taped discussion served both research and pedagogical functions, generating data on the expectations and problems of the students, and constituting a concrete means of introducing cultural difference an explicit theme. All students participated happily and enthusiastically.

The range of cultural backgrounds represented was wide and encompassed a complex mix of social, ethnic and religious identifications. Six were second-generation Turkish migrants, with strong Muslim identifications. A Somalian student shared a religion with the Turkish students but, growing up in Canberra with a professional parent working for the UN, not their cultural and social experiences. The four students who identified as Anglo Celtic expressed little religious affiliation. Three students, of Vietnamese, Croatian, and Italian background, and all second-generation migrants, expressed varying but notable interest in their (Christian) religious heritage. The social backgrounds of the group were diverse in terms of public/private schooling and parental occupation, but most were 'first-generation' tertiary students. One student came from a rural background, and one had a disability. The age of participants was not elicited, but few appeared to be older than late 20s. The sole male student transferred out of the group after a few weeks, uncomfortable with the gender imbalance.

The group then met weekly in an extended tutorial format of 90 rather than 60 minutes, and at the conclusion of the teaching period, the second focus group and written evaluations were used to ascertain the students' responses to the project.

Theoretical Frameworks

The difficulties this project sought to address were not unknown in earlier periods, nor were they neglected; there is a long and broad tradition of research on educational strategies for assisting socially disadvantaged students, including those

from migrant, ethnic minority and NESB backgrounds. It is only relatively recently, however, that new levels of migration have put the issue of 'multicultural education' – focussed on the double-sided task of teaching multicultural awareness within multicultural contexts – on the agenda. Researchers have not been slow to take up the question of multicultural education, and there is already a rich literature on this issue. This literature is notable for its breadth, but two broad strands can be discerned. On the one hand, there is a body of literature which takes a broad and often philosophical approach to the question of what kind of education is appropriate in a multicultural society. Debates on this level sometimes address specific teaching practices, but they mostly revolve around general principles, such as those concerning the construction and revision of 'the canon' in the humanities (Taylor 1994; Gutman 1995; McDonough 1997; Wolf 1994).[3]

On the other hand, there has been a proliferation of research with more immediately practical objectives, focused on 'operationalisable' strategies. This research spans a wide range of disciplines, and much of it is focused on strategies and interventions which respond to particular circumstances within specific pedagogical contexts. (Day and Glick 2000; Keating and Byles 1991; McLoughlin 2001; Ramsey 2000). In Ramsey's field of professional counseling, for example, there is an emphasis on structured experiential exercises, while web-based strategies are the focus of McLoughlin's concern with distance education.

The project reported here shared the practical concerns of the latter strand of research, and found in this literature a number of broad strategies that are consonant with its objectives. There is widespread agreement on the pedagogical value of making cultural diversity an explicit theme (Ramsey 2000; McLoughlin 2001; Keating and Byles 1991; Day and Glick 2000; Hurtado et al 2000), and a broad convergence around strategies of incorporating students' experience, and a 'strengths-based' rather than 'deficits-based' perspective on cultural diversity (Ramsey 2000; Mcloughlin 2001).

The project was also shaped, however, by reflection on the broader debate. The central issue in this regard concerns the *normative* principles which animate aspirations to multiculturalism, and in particular multicultural education. In particular, the study rejected the attempt, not uncommon in the practice-oriented research (see for example Ramsey 2000), to justify and define multicultural education on the principle of *cultural relativism*. The difficulties with this principle have been convincingly articulated by Charles Taylor, in his now classic essay on the 'politics of recognition' (1994). As he argues, the automatic or abstract 'recognition' that is entailed by cultural relativism (which posits that all cultures are worthy of equal respect) is ultimately not recognition at all, because it replaces respect with patronizing condescension.

Taylor's critique of cultural relativism does not, of course, entail a rejection of multiculturalism, but rather a rethinking of its normative principles, and the principle he proposes in its place is highly relevant to the aims and objectives of our attempt to develop social and cultural diversity into a pedagogical resource. All human cultures, he argues, (or more precisely, all those which have animated whole societies over some considerable stretch of time) are owed the *presumption* of respect. It is wrong, on this view, to presume, through prejudice or simply ignorance, that other cultures are not of equal worth. But any actual judgment of worth has to be

based on real knowledge gained through genuine dialogue. There is, therefore, considerable work required to make any valid value judgment; authentic judgments of worth, he suggests, require a sustained engagement with the unfamiliar, and ultimately the transformation of the self. In the absence of such work of dialogue, we are simply judging others by our original, familiar standards, and praising the other for being like us.

Most relevant to the research discussed here is Tayor's articulation of the concrete process of the intercultural dialogue through which authentic recognition occurs. Authentic recognition, he argues, is based on what Gadamer has called a 'fusion of horizons.' As Taylor puts it, this is the process in which we

> learn to move in a broader horizon, within which what we have formerly taken for granted as the background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of the formerly unfamiliar culture. The 'fusion of horizons' operates through our developing new vocabularies of comparison, by means of which we can articulate these contrasts (Taylor, 1994:67).

Taylor's articulation of the politics of recognition, and its application to education, has not been without its critics. Liberals have contested its basic principles and offered some appealing alternatives, including the notion of cosmopolitanism, while others, more sympathetic to Taylor's basis premises, have sought to extend or redirect it (Gutmann 1994; Wolf 1994).[4] Space does not permit a thorough examination of these issues here, but one of the criticisms leveled against Taylor is particularly relevant to the project.

In their defense of cosmopolitanism, Appiah and others importantly alert us to the danger of over-homogenous conceptions of 'cultures', stressing the increasingly mixed and even hotch potch character of contemporary 'cultures' and identities. But while it is true that the nature of such historically new 'multicultural cultures' remains to be clarified from Taylor's hermeneutical perspective, it is not true, as has been suggested, that this perspective works with a notion of cultural purity, or assumes that cultures are static (Appiah 1994, 2006; McDonough 1997).[5] As has been made explicit in other hermeneutical attempts to transcend the debate between liberals and communitarians,[6] an emphasis on the multiplicities (and even conflicts) *within* cultures, and within the individual identities shaped by them, is compatible with the hermeneutical assumptions which underlie Taylor's work. As this work shows, the hermeneutical conception of cultures as interpretive structures associated with historical communities does not entail any assumptions about purity, stasis or harmony, or the singularity of 'cultural' identity.[7]

The strategies

Two strategies were proposed at the outset, but were implemented in a self-consciously flexible manner, and were developed and refined in accordance with the particular requirements and dynamics of the group. No claim to originality is made for the strategies, but while they draw on widely recognised teaching practices, it is also true that they are generally only intermittently deployed.

The first strategy was to *relate the ideas, concepts, perspectives and subject matter of the subject to the worlds already encountered by the student.* This is a widely used

pedagogical strategy, but it takes on new dimensions in multicultural contexts where a common experience cannot be assumed, and the worlds students have encountered may be very diverse. Given the transient nature of student body, moreover, the cultural backgrounds represented in a tutorial can change dramatically from year to year. In such a context, it was felt that the most feasible way knowledge of the various milieus could be gained is directly from the participants in each group. This process was initiated through an initial focus group which canvassed the social and cultural backgrounds of the students and set the agenda for the ongoing exploration of the diverse social and cultural milieus experienced by the students. Thereafter, students were encouraged to draw on their personal and familial experience, and adopt a comparative perspective in discussion on various aspects of the subject content – in this instance issues related to the (changing) structure of the family. A 'Socratic' approach of prompting reflection through questions was deployed.

The second strategy was to provide *extensive and intensive discussion of the intellectual content of written assessment, with particular attention to implicit cultural and intellectual assumptions and specific historical experiences.* This strategy was based on the premise that technical assistance was available from other sources, such as study skills units. Discussion of the intellectual content of written assessment is also a standard teaching practice, but more time than normal was devoted to it, and particular attention was paid to making explicit implicit cultural assumptions and references to specific historical experiences within its design and content. For example, discussion of essay and research assignment topics relating to historical changes to the structure of 'the' family made any implicit references to the Western experience explicit, and raised the issue of its historical and cultural specificity. As it was implemented, however, it soon became evident that this discussion was not readily separable from discussion of the 'technical' requirements of assessment (in this case, essay and report writing). In practice, of course, these two components can be and often are discussed in tandem. In this case, we began discussing the essay and assignment topics and how to deal with them a few weeks in to the course, and spent some time nearly every week reviewing the content and/or technical requirements involved including critical skills of explanation, analysis, use of evidence and writing. Discussion of these intellectual skills could largely be presented in a 'universal' form, as thematisation of social and cultural difference served no purpose.

This emphasis on assessment does have the potential to skew the distribution of discussion time within the course, particularly where the assessment consists of assignments on a selection of topics rather than an attempt to gauge students' knowledge of the curriculum as a whole, often sought, for example, through exams. This problem was minimized, however, because the range of essay topics covered a broad part of the curriculum, and was dealt with systematically in the tutorial. Discussion of the topics provided an opportunity for discussion of subject material central to the course, and exposed students to discussion of content outside of their own areas of research/work.

Evaluation of these strategies was undertaken on the basis of both staff observation, and student feedback gained from the final focus group and written evaluations. Both avenues of evaluation suggest that the strategies have the potential to enrich the curriculum and enhance the learning experience.

From a teaching perspective, one of the most important outcomes of the strategy of *relating the ideas, concepts, perspectives and subject matter of the subject to the worlds already encountered by the students* was that the process of eliciting of the students' diverse social and cultural experiences achieved the sociology lecturer's abiding aspiration to 'denaturalise' social practices, and powerfully illustrated the founding sociological premise of the 'social construction' of social institutions. At the same time, it enriched the curriculum by bringing into the classroom knowledge and experience of a range of social and cultural experiences beyond that which staff could themselves practically introduce. The synergy which emerged from the ensuing interaction of concepts and theoretical frameworks provided by staff and empirical knowledge provided by students was highly productive.

This strategy was also an oft-cited source of student satisfaction, perhaps best summed up by the student who noted that 'this tutorial was what I imagined tutorials would be like.' Students reported that the explicit thematization of cultural difference through reflection on their own cultural specificities facilitated learning and heightened engagement with the subject on a number of levels. In the first place, a direct impact was apparent, with students commenting that the strategy of relating the issues of the subject to their own lives enhanced their grasp of key concepts and core curriculum. As one student put it, 'you can engage more with the topic if you can relate it to your own life.'

The strategy of relating the subject matter of the course to the personal experiences of the students also had an indirect benefit for student engagement, in that it contributed to the generation of close personal connections among students in the group. These ties were also encouraged by the small size of the group, and even smaller group work within it, but 'hearing about other people's lives' also played an important role. The personal relationships that resulted countered the common experience of university as unsupported and isolated learning, and were often cited as an important factor in student satisfaction. In fact, the extent to which this strategy contributed to improved students' satisfaction levels suggests that this strategy could be equally beneficial even in the absence of cultural diversity. As one student reported, the personal ties 'made it easy to talk.'

Reflection on the implementation of this strategy also has a bearing on a particular issue that has arisen in the literature on multicultural education, which concerns the processes through which 'diversity' is brought into the classroom. As McDonough (1997) notes, in their attempts to acknowledge and respect the cultural diversity of their students, teachers often bring in examples of cultural minority events or figures. But as is shown by the case of the US teacher who tried to engage her Pomo Indian students with an ancestral story about Slug Woman, only to be met with 'either open hostility of stone silence,' this approach can fail disastrously, either because the material is irrelevant or embarrassing. The strategy of focussing on the worlds already encountered by the students, however, circumvents these problems, because it is the students themselves who bring in such cultural content, and do so only on the basis of its relevance to their lives.

The second strategy, which in its implementation involved extensive and intensive discussion of the intellectual content of, *and* the technical skills required for written assessment, also had observable benefits from both teaching and learning perspectives. From the teaching point of view, its most conspicuous benefit was its

contribution to alleviating the problems of transition experienced by 'first-generation' tertiary students. While thematising cultural difference had some relevance, it was the attention to the norms and conventions of essay writing which proved most beneficial for NESB and ESB students alike. A factor in the success of this strategy was its implementation in a manner which allowed students to access the information provided according to their capacities and needs. As one student noted, 'we're all at different stages, but that was accommodated.'

The students also (almost universally) expressed a very positive response to this strategy. The sole respondent who reported ambivalence about it felt that the time spent on this 'nuts and bolts' work detracted from fuller engagement with the curriculum. For the most part, however, this part of the project was very highly valued. One participant noted that 'other subjects just hand out essay topics. You feel like you're dumped in the middle of the ocean and have to swim.' In this regard, it is worth noting that many students felt that the more intensive discussion of assessment tasks was more like the supportive learning and teaching practices of their secondary education.

Impact on student 'performance'

While student feedback questionaries and the concluding focus group document a marked enhancement of students' subjective learning experience, the impact of the strategies on student performance is more difficult to assess. To measure this impact in a meaningful way would clearly require a much larger study, but some tentative impressions can be offered on the basis of the limited experience of this project. Impact of this kind is notoriously difficult to define, let alone quantify, but retention rates and grades are two obvious places to start. In the first case, although the sample was small, it is worth noting that all students completed the subject. Coupled with the reported high levels of satisfaction, this suggests that these strategies may play a role in protecting those most at risk of dropping out, and warrant further testing in relation to this issue. In the second case, while any attempt to measure the impact of pedagogical strategies on grades is fraught with (perhaps insuperable) difficulties, my impression is that the most likely impact of these strategies would be in reducing the number of students who fail, and generating some limited movement in grades. This particular project suggested that, in a marking schema of A-F,[8] the most likely movement would be from D to C grade. In a larger trial, however, I would expect to find some movement from C to B and B to A.[9]

Difficulties

The most significant difficulties affecting this project stem from its very limited scope. It is for this reason perhaps best considered as a pilot study which could guide further research. Problems of scale emerged in two ways. Firstly, the strategies were trialled in only one tutorial. As any teacher knows, tutorial dynamics vary significantly, even from class to class in a given semester, and there is never any guarantee that an innovation which works famously one year will work well the next. A further problem related to scale, however, is that the (by contemporary standards) small size of the tutorial in which they were trialled undoubtedly contributed to the high levels of student satisfaction. As the size of the tutorial was mentioned by a number of students as an important factor in the enhanced learning experience, with one noting that 'class size made it less intimidating,' and other

studies have found that smaller class sizes are conducive to better learning outcomes (Hurtado et al. 2002), it is possible that at least some, and possibly a significant proportion, of the benefits observed in the project are attributable to this very factor. It is worth noting, however, that the size (up to 25) of tutorials with which we are now routinely confronted is a significant factor in the sense of isolation that is a major source of student dissatisfaction, and it is precisely these classes which are in need of teaching strategies which will increase students engagement with each other, with staff, and ultimately with the subject matter of their courses. Evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategies in larger tutorials therefore is called for.

A second difficulty is that the gender imbalance in the group did not allow any analysis of gender as a contributing factor in the outcomes. It is possible that the gender balance in the uptake of the project is significant (girls possibly being more willing to define themselves as in need of help, and to seek help), but it is also true that the subject to which it was attached (*Families and Change)* was heavily female dominated as a whole. The fact that gender is not an equity category exacerbated the difficulties of gender analysis in this instance. This issue could, again, be pursued in further trialling of the strategies.

3. Expanding Horizons

Like all research on multicultural education the study reported here was designed to respond to the multicultural context of contemporary education. However its primary focus diverged from much of the research to the extent that its aim was not to develop a course *on* multiculturalism, but to build self-reflexivity about cultural diversity and difference into conventional disciplinary areas of study. However, while staff observation and student feedback clearly suggest that the strategies trialled served a number of important pedagogical functions in this regard, reflection on their evolution over the course of the semester is also relevant to some of the central issues in the broader debate on education which seeks to foster multicultural consciousness.

The most significant development in this regard was the spontaneous emergence of a process of intercultural dialogue in the group around one of the most salient contemporary axes of 'cultural difference'.[10] This was a dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims, in this case all Christians, but including students of both European and Asian descent. The cultural differences involved were of considerable interest to both sides, and the opportunity to discuss them was highly valued by all participants. The experience of intercultural communication was however very asymmetrical. The Turkish students greatly appreciated the opportunity to give an account of their religion and culture, and the non-Turkish students greatly appreciated the opportunity to ask questions of them. There was, however, no parallel presentation of, or interest in, the content of non-Muslim cultural identities.[11]

There is no doubt that something like a fusion of horizons was involved in this exchange, and that it contributed to the intense appreciation for the experience that was expressed from both sides of the conversation. The Muslim students repeatedly voiced their satisfaction with the way in which their cultural specificity was not simply tolerated but concretely recognised, in this particular dialogue and in ongoing discussion. Furthermore, this experience of recognition occurred even though the non-Muslims questioned the Muslims' evaluations and interpretations of

their own, and mainstream Australian or Western values. As the Turkish students' comments emphatically confirm, however, this dialogue constituted real – albeit 'critical' - recognition.

It is also true that while this development was a potential difficulty in terms of the project insofar as it tended to occur to some extent independently of the curriculum, the benefits from it suggest that such 'diversions' may be worthwhile on other grounds (especially as the diversion from the content of the course occurred in only one week). It is undoubted that this intercultural dialogue played a crucial role in the fact that those students who can be considered to be the most culturally marginal reported feeling 'heard' and 'recognized,' in a way they had not encountered previously at school or university, and that this 'recognition' was an important factor in their heightened engagement with the subject. As one of the Turkish students commented, 'in other tutorials we are considered aliens.'

In addition, the enthusiastic appreciation of the opportunity for intercultural dialogue expressed by all of the students suggests that rather than generating resentment from 'long-time Australians,' this experience has the potential to build intercultural understanding from both sides. The dialogue was seen by long timers as contributing to their education As one student put it, 'hearing about other people's lives and culture made me have a different view to what I might have had, so was an education.' Such divergences from course content may or may not be acceptable in conventional classes, but there is no doubt that in this instance, it constituted an authentic experience of intercultural dialogue of the kind that is sought by those committed to multicultural education.

4. Conclusion

A number of factors were in all probability involved in the success of the project, including the small tutorial size, the Socratic method, and the fostering of personal relationships. It seems clear, however, that the particular strategies trialled here played a role in the enrichment of the curriculum and the exceptionally high levels of student satisfaction. Against this background, there is good reason to trial the strategies in range of further contexts, including larger tutorials, other sociology and humanities subject areas, and in courses attempting to foster multicultural consciousness. The principle that should guide any adaptations that these various contexts may call for is that 'cultural difference' should wherever possible form at least a permanent background point of reference. Clearly, there will be many areas for which this would be either artificial or cumbersome, or quite legitimately outside the area of expertise of teaching staff. At a minimum, however, the specificity of the Western experience can be acknowledged.

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[1] This project was undertaken in conjunction with Assoc. Professor Kereen Reiger, and was attached to her course *Families and Change.* I would like to acknowledge her contribution to the conception and execution of the project, but take full responsibility for any deficiencies in the analysis of it provided here. I developed the strategies, conducted the tutorial in which they were trialled and wrote the report on which this paper is based.

[2] Of 65 students surveyed, 30 expressed interest in the project. Of the 17 of these who did not participate, most were not eligible, while a few could not participate for logistical reasons. A further 22 students were 'not sure' if they were interested, and only 13 declared they were not.

[3] Charles Taylor's essay on the 'politics of recognition,' which surveys radical multiculturalism and its critics as well as offering a more nuanced defence of multicultural principles, generated much of this literature.This literature sometimes addresses more specific and practical issues, but by and large retains a general focus.

[4] A number of the criticisms centre on the issue of the preservation of cultures, which has a very specific context in the 'Quebec question' in Canada.

[5] This clarification could proceed on the hermeneutical premise of the ongoing transformation of traditions in new historical (and in this instance, increasingly multicultural) contexts.

[6] Paul Ricoeur's notion of the 'conflict of interpretations' articulates a theoretical basis for a conception of culture as a shared frame of reference open to competing and partly contradictory interpretations. Appiah's own construal of multiple modes of being – being black, being gay, etc – within a culture points in this direction (Appiah, 1994: 159).

[7] This is one of the central themes of the more extended discussion of these issues I have made, in Creativity and Critique, Brill, Lieden, (forthcoming, 2007)

[8] A:80-100%, B:70-79%, C:60-69%, D:50-59%, F:0-49%.

[9] There was no attempt in this project to measure any movement in grades. Work was marked according to the usual criteria, as students were informed in their consent forms. They were also given contact details for the Head of School and Human Ethics Committee to pursue any concerns about the grading process or results.

[10] This development was a logical outcome of the philosophy animating the study, but it was to a significant extent propelled by the students themselves.

[11] In light of the theoretical debates around cosmopolitanism,, it is worth noting that in this particular instance, most of the Muslim students identified unambiguously and primarily as Muslims, and proffered a homogenous account of that identity. Other students felt more complex cultural claims, but rarely expressed this explicitly.

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