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A case study investigating international and local students' perceptions and experiences of teaching in an intercultural tertiary context

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A Case Study Investigating International and Local Students' Perceptions and Experiences of Teaching and Learning in an Intercultural Tertiary Context

A dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong, 2000.

Abstract

How do international and local students and their lecturers perceive and experience teaching and learning in an intercultural context and what kind of impact does an intercultural context have on both teaching and learning and attitudes to cultural diversity? This research investigates, from a critical theorist perspective, the relationship between the use of a dialogic method of teaching, student-centred learning and the participation of international students in the tertiary classroom. Underpinning the study is the belief that international students bring a wealth of cultural capital to tertiary classrooms that can be used as a valuable resource to broaden the critical thinking skills and intercultural understanding of all students, both local and international, and their lecturers.

International students studying at Australian universities provide rich diversity, income for institutions, and potential international connections for local students. Yet, international students often face marginalisation and alienation and are sometimes seen as non-participating and underperforming. In some earlier studies, the focus has tended to be on international students' perceived difficulties and "deficiencies" that need to be remediated as quickly as possible for them to "adapt" to our academic traditions. However, more recent studies focus increasingly on lecturers and their teaching practice, as opposed to a focus on students and their cultural backgrounds. It is argued in this literature and in this study that lecturers should revise their teaching practice and employ teaching strategies that create a learning context that is student-centred and in which students feel it is appropriate to speak up and learn from each other. The study theorises that it is the culture of the context that needs to be examined when discussing student learning, not the cultural backgrounds of students. It posits that a person's cultural background is not static nor are there universals that describe it. Rather, it is flexible and ever changing in response to different contexts, including the culture of the university and the university classroom.

The study is a multiple case study in a single context, a tertiary setting, using both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. The study focused on a number of different sets of students and their varied classes at a single site by collecting data using a variety of instruments, including semi-structured, in-depth interviews; focus groups; observations; and a survey. The students at the focus of the study came from a wide range of countries, including Vietnam, Pakistan, Sweden, the US, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Japan, Tonga, Nepal and Australia.

The research sheds new light on international and local students' perceptions and experiences of teaching and learning as well as the pedagogical, personal and social impacts of an intercultural context. Documenting evidence from students and lecturers provides an opportunity for both their voices to be heard in the research literature. Among the findings is that both international and local students strongly indicate that they want to have a voice in the classroom with the lecturer acting as a facilitator rather than an all-knowing imparter of knowledge. Rather than international students being seen as a "problem", students and lecturers in this study see cultural diversity as a means to broaden their thinking, appreciate difference, and improve cultural understanding.

For Christian, Christopher and Charlotte

I would like to express my sincere thanks to my supervisors Dr. W. Rifkin, Dr. W. Vialle and especially, Dr. C. Fox who has been a wonderful source of inspiration as mentor, colleague and friend.

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