Beyond Workshops: A Conceptual Framework for Embedding Development of Intercultural Competence in Business Education

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Background

A Carrick-funded project, Embedding Development of Intercultural Competence in Business Education (EDIC), aims to develop the competence of Business graduates in valuing cultural differences, communicating easily across diverse cultures and acquiring the range of skills and knowledge needed to conduct business globally. Knight (2003) describes the intercultural dimension as "relating to the diversity of cultures that exist within countries, communities, and institutions". While the need for institutional strategies and educational processes to develop intercultural competence in learning, teaching and social contexts is long overdue (Volet & Ang, 1998; Leask, 2003), intercultural engagement and learning is not, however, an easy outcome to achieve. There is evidence to suggest that academics tend to perceive student difference as a barrier to learning and that students tend to focus on problems with teachers, teaching and group work. Moving beyond this deficit orientation requires that the institution or faculty develop a systemic and integrated approach that enables staff and students to value intercultural diversity. The research literature on intercultural competence generally, and Crichton and Scarino (2007), Paige et al. (1999), Liddicott et al. (2003) specifically, suggests that intercultural competence is a dynamic, interactive and self-reflective learning process involving staff and students with the potential to transform values, skills and knowledge.

Developing Intercultural Competence

Rather than a "bolt on" or "add in" approach to developing intercultural competence, a systemic approach with integrated strategies is required for sustainable outcomes. Thus the project engages with a range of stakeholders in Business Education to embed the development of intercultural competence. Specific questions such as those that follow are addressed:

1. How can Business academics successfully develop intercultural competence among students? For example, how to assist academics to design and implement group work activities that enable students to draw out culturally different (and/or similar) approaches to working across cultures - in terms of ethics, negotiation, and multicultural, global teams.

2. How can Business academic leaders successfully support and embed the development of intercultural competence in Business education programs? For example, as part of the informal curriculum, funding peer mentoring and peer learning programs which include emphasis on developing intercultural competence through mentor training and peer support.

3. How can student services staff in Business faculties better interact and support students from diverse backgrounds in their transition into the Australian university academic context? For example, Flinders University's Cultural Diversity and Inclusive Practice Toolkit has a targeted resource Theory Into Practice Strategies (TIPS) with helpful tips for student services staff to improve their communication.

It is unlikely, however, that the values, skills and knowledge will be developed in students unless teaching and student services staff embody and embed them into their practice and interactions, and unless academic leaders recognise and provide strong impetus for such initiatives.

Developing Student Competence: Some Common Emphases

A range of approaches that can develop students' learning for a rapidly changing, globalised world are frequently employed in universities. They range from top-down approaches that mandate change to voluntary or bottom-up approaches such as academic development and dissemination of resources. Top-down approaches tend to be characterised by the introduction of new procedures and policies, often meeting resistance in implementation and adoption. Bottom-up approaches have long histories, especially through the provision of workshops, resources and new tools, with variable success. Both approaches discussed below have implications for successfully embedding the development of intercultural competence and its systemic sustainability.

Most often attempts to develop student skills begin with providing resources and tools, especially "tips and tricks" that the busy academic can dip into as required. Other often extensive resources and tools are provided for those committing more time to improving their teaching and student learning outcomes. New tools are seen as drivers of change, however assumptions are often made that they
are themselves capable of achieving intended development. In much of our experience, tools and resources alone have proved inadequate for embedding change and development. There are a plethora of resources on teaching related to issues of diversity, many websites that provide intercultural communication materials for innovative and creative strategies in classroom and assessment activities. However, to date, whilst these are indeed useful, they have arguably not yet been effective in embedding the development of intercultural competence in higher education. Perhaps the expectations accompanying the provision of such resources and tools parallels the expectation of a deep approach to learning simply by providing students with a textbook (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 2003).

A second approach has been academic development processes directed to the use of innovative teaching, learning and assessment activities. For example, introducing assessable group work projects completed largely out-of-class and in-class collaborative learning and assessment activities including team-based learning (Briguglio, 2006; Lenski, 2005; Ramburuth and Welch, 2005; Michaelsen et al. 2004; Volet, 2004; Volet and Ang, 1998). Group work, for example, has been seen to offer many opportunities for developing students’ intercultural communication skills in different ways. Teamwork is one of the employability skills which universities seek to develop in their students and which is highly valued by the employer community (BIHECC, 2007). Although social interaction provides important avenues for learning from others, proximity to other cultural groups does not necessarily ensure intercultural learning or development of competence (Volet & Ang, 1998). Thus an integrated approach is needed for sustainable learning outcomes to be developed.

However, a predominant mode of academic development has been in workshops and while they may be conducted with a group of academics, or even a discipline, their outcomes are basically individual in orientation. The experience of coming away from an academic development workshop designed to encourage academics to adopt a change-conceptions student-focused view of teaching (in lieu of an information-transmission teacher-focused one), is often limited to renewed enthusiasm to try something new. Yet that enthusiasm and initial impetus is now often lost in the increasing tide of competing and conflicting priorities in everyday academic life, especially as RQF approaches. Not infrequently, successful changes are isolated in the teaching practices of individual academics and their students’ learning. Sometimes the developments of innovators and early adopters (Rogers, 1995) conflict with other aspects of discipline practice or faculty policy and procedures, and thus face diffusion and sustainability issues (Ramsden, 2003).

A third approach to broadening the uptake of change and development by staff and students in higher education, and closely related to embedding at the sector level, has been increased attention given to dissemination. Two substantial pieces of work from this perspective have been McKenzie et al. (2005) and Southwell et al. (2005) both nationally-funded by the Carrick Institute. Since dissemination through embedding strategies has been shown in their research to be strongly linked to sustainability of project outcomes and innovations, each application for funding from the Carrick Institute is expected to outline procedures for dissemination.

A Systemic Embedding Approach

The conceptual framework developed in our EDIC project provides a systematic way to address the requisite components for an integrated, systemic embedding strategy. The project methodology is evidence-based and actively engages to develop staff and students’ intercultural competence through iterative, action-oriented collaboration at multiple levels across four Business faculties. This methodology is not only consistent with the complexity and self-reflexive nature of intercultural education itself but also with our development of a conceptual framework for embedding.

There are three core components of this embedding framework: first, communities of practice; second, curriculum, policies and procedures; and third, resources and tools. It is the collective nature of communities of practice which underpin and imbue the commitment to systemic change. Thus it is the identification of relevant communities of practice and work within and by them that is crucial to an embedding approach. In effect, an embedding approach reverses the customary approach that provides tips and tricks and workshops that rely principally on individual efforts which are not necessarily systemic and certainly not systemic.

Communities of practice, a term introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991), refers to those groups of people who have a shared commitment to and understanding of the work practices they undertake as a group, as a network, or as a distributed/dispersed group. In the context of a change program, communities of practice are vital as they are the champions who collectively are motivated, on board and take action to encourage and enact change. It is in the process of sharing reflective practice and generating new knowledge that possibilities for change are opened up and supported. For example, universities are realising the importance of being responsive to government and industry needs for graduates with intercultural competencies for leading and managing in a global economy (BIHECC, 2007). Therefore, in the EDIC project we seek to positively engage communities of practices including academic leadership groups (program directors, unit coordinators of international business, teachers of cross-cultural management), members of diversity working parties, student reference groups, and peer mentoring facilitators.

Policies, procedures and curriculum are the processes through which change can be systematically initiated and furthered. They include, for example, a university or faculty policy that requires the development of a graduate attribute such intercultural competence. Such policy can be embedded through the procedures for approving new units/subjects or programs/degrees to give attention to the development of intercultural competence through intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, assessment and assessment criteria. Alignment of these components is therefore as important as curriculum content itself. For example, the development of intercultural competence has been approved in a new core unit of a Bachelor of Commerce. The unit was prepared using a unit of study outline template (and supporting website resources) that embeds the alignment of the curriculum with a range of teaching, learning and assessment activities to develop intercultural competence. This alignment includes the development of specific assessment criteria for self-assessment and tutor marking of each assessment task. Curriculum mapping of this graduate attribute across a degree/program enables subsequent targeting to embed this identified graduate attribute throughout the degree as required. The informal curriculum is also an integral part of what is funded and thus able to support students developing intercultural competence as a part of their student experience, for example in training to be a peer mentor or being a mentee on arrival.
Accrediting bodies, particularly relevant to business faculties, have standards and rules which are additional examples of drivers of change.

Resources and tools provide new materials for embedding into the learning and teaching activities as well as new ways of using materials in a system-wide approach and in particular curricula. Thus one common embedding strategy is to make available resources for use in class to staff and students through a range of websites e.g. group work that encourages a diversity focus for students and for staff in the design, management and assessment of group work. Tools for tracking learning outcomes in a group learning activity through self and peer assessment (e.g. an online program such as SPARK) across a unit/subject (e.g. an online graduate attribute tracking in a software program such as RevView) and across a program (e.g. Digital Measures, a software system supporting Business School assurance of learning for AACSB accreditation), complete the feedback loop for a systemic approach to embedding.

Accordingly, our integrated embedding strategy seeks to embed the development of intercultural competence in these three ways where possible in each of the four institutional sites, The University of Sydney, University of NSW, Queensland University of Technology and University of South Australia. However, as each of these sites have unique challenges relating to their particular contexts not all institutions have the same possibilities for embedding at each of the levels.

Conclusion

Our embedding framework has application beyond the intercultural competence context of this project. Indeed, as members of our project team engage in various other Carrick projects across multiple institutional sites, we are finding that it is providing a succinct way of representing the varying stages at which different university partners are commencing in what is a larger teaching and learning project of systemic change within higher education. Furthermore, the embedding framework is proving useful for seeing not only contrasts between differing university contexts but also it is useful for identifying the gaps in an overview of the project framework where embedding is a necessary project strategy.

The authors are project team members of Embedding the Development of Intercultural Competence in Business Education funded by the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. For more information about this Carrick project, contact the Project Manager, Chris Sykes on 0402 791 071.

References


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