

BRIDGING THE CULTURAL DIVIDE -a psychosocial perspective.

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Abstract: International students invest large sums of money when choosing to study in English speaking Universities. They are hoping for opportunities to immerse themselves in English language and Western style culture. Local students attending the same university have completely different expectations. Frequently a cultural divide occurs between the two groups typified by awkward silences, unmet expectations and stereotyping.

This widely documented phenomenon has inspired Academic staff to devise clever strategies as desperate attempts to create more inclusive working environments with their students. But the gap still exists.

An essential link is missing in these attempts to bridge the cross cultural communication divide. This is the addition of a psychosocial perspective. Including this perspective helps everyone develop an understanding of what is really happening when a cultural divide occurs.

This presentation will explore the theory and practice of a psychosocial perspective by explaining methods which actively involve students. Change occurs through focusing on the personal thoughts and experiences always present in interactions and allowing participants to explore their own actions and reactions. Practical exercises will provide opportunities for participants to build their own understanding and capacities for bridging this communication gap.

By demystifying intercultural communication dynamics both staff and students at UniSA are gaining insight and skills necessary for effective communication which enhance learning opportunities and cultural understanding for all.

Key Words: psychosocial, transition, social interaction, cross cultural, internationalisation, practical approach, communication

Introduction

International Students arriving to study in Australia are confronted with an avalanche of information and first impressions. Their primary concern is to establish their daily living needs, followed closely but developing a working knowledge of their new environment.

Students can readily identify their needs for information and assistance about housing, finance, shopping, transportation and the myriad of details necessary to negotiate basic essentials in a new city. Most tertiary institutions well recognise their role in providing assistance and information in this area. Similarly the need to develop social bonds and networks is well articulated by students and opportunities for this are catered for during orientation programs. Unfortunately these opportunities do not readily translate into long term friendships across cultures. This workshop explores ways International students can enhance their interactions with local students in both social and teaching and learning contexts by assisting students to recognise the process of transition and the rules of conduct in Australia

Importance of Early Intervention

The impressions and habits International students form during the first three months in Australia are critical to their ongoing lifestyle and subsequent ability to navigate their way through study and social engagement. At the very time when they need to establish social networks, they are attempting to make sense of the blatant and subtle cultural, linguistic and social differences. There is also an unconscious expectation that they should work it out for

themselves – after all we all learnt social values through interacting with our families and friends – nobody spelt it out when we were growing up. For this reason there are less efforts made to inform students about norms and practices in this culture or the personal impact of the transition they are going through. There is an assumption that by enabling students to interact with others they will adapt to the practices and manage in our society. Unfortunately this does not take into consideration that learning social norms usually takes time and experience, at least it did for all of us when we were growing up.

Without this knowledge International students are left to make their own conclusions about the behaviours they observe among others. Upon arrival they naturally have a heightened awareness of social differences but the demands of jumping into academic life soon after arrival mean that students do not have time or attention to focus on gaining a deeper understanding of these behaviours. They draw conclusions about others based on their early impressions that can have long lasting effects on interaction.

Moreover there are few ongoing opportunities to gain deeper insight in the university environment. The culture of university is frequently one of achievement and competition. Personal disclosure of difficulties or negativity is not encouraged nor are there ways for students to voice their thoughts and feelings about the differences they encounter and the impact of this on them personally.

I believe this is a hit and miss approach to social and cultural awareness which deprives people of a deeper understanding of the rules of engagement upon which interactions are based. Without this deeper understanding students do not have skills to bridge the cultural divide and may suffer from insecurity for a very long time. Taking time to be explicit about Australian social norms and practices and the process of transition, assists in demystifying what is expected of people and encourages greater interaction across cultures. Just as we teach students the rules of grammar when they are learning to speak a foreign language in order to assist them to become fluent more quickly, we should teach them the rules of engagement that will govern their interactions socially and in the classroom.

Social Impact.

Adaptation is dependant, among other things, on the amount and type of engagement International students have with others, what they learn from other International students and their personalities and cultural expectations.

My research with International students over the past three years commonly indicates that the difficulties they have interacting with locals are all too frequently experienced as their own personal inadequacies rather than a function of not knowing the rules or what is expected of them in the situation.

There is a tendency for new International students to become quiet for fear of failure or ridicule. Most students adapt after some months, all make accommodations to their lifestyle and some of these accommodations are more supportive than others. Not all students can successfully manage their fears of inadequacy and failure.

In the teaching and learning context and possibly also in the social context, initial impressions tend to inform the choice of communication style across cultures. Others with whom they mix in particular local students come to expect International students to be quiet and non contributive as if this is their personality, rather than an adaptation, and patterns of non engagement between local and International students then set in. Over time, as the demands of assignments and exams become pressing, the possibilities for reviewing the communication style and thereby creating forms of interaction, where those with a different background feel comfortable to share more of themselves, recede. The cultural divide is thus perpetuated.

The Psychosocial Approach

I believe that we could better support International students by making at least some of the social and cultural expectations explicit. Similarly by helping them understand the nature and impact of the transition by contextualising their experiences, they will be better prepared to face the challenges required in re- establishing themselves in a new country. By helping students understand that what they are going through is a normal part of the transition process and giving them a short hand map of how to go about life here, there is also potential to alleviate some their sense of personal failure or inadequacy.

For this reason I have devised what I call a psychosocial approach to bridging the cultural divide. The term psychosocial refers to the commonly held beliefs and expectations that prevail in the society and underpin the way we engage with others. These vary from culture to culture, context to context and indeed year to year. Eg we will place more emphasis on information regarding safety, harassment and health in 2005 than we did in 2000 when the threat of terrorism and bird flu were less a part of the political agenda.

A psychosocial approach is different from a didactic approach in that it emphasises engagement with others in ways that are non-threatening as a means of developing confidence in social interactions. This usually involves collaborative, joining activities that foster appreciation and respect for their personal life experience and needs.

Rather than talk about this approach, I think it will be valuable for people to be able to experience how it works and then we can talk about the impact. In this way you will be experiencing what I am asking the students to experience and can draw your own conclusions about its efficacy. I believe that getting students actively involved is integral for creating understanding. As human beings it is natural to learn how to socialise through modelling and personal experience therefore creating opportunities for this is fundamental for understanding.

I have chosen two different exercises to illustrate this approach. There are several other exercises that we also use and they are part of a suite of exercises that are being developed over time. The first is suitable for newly arrived undergraduate students, most of whom are leaving home for the first time. The second I use with both undergraduate and post graduate students. These exercises both take 20-30 minutes and are part of a program presented during Orientation Week– which at UniSA we call FISO - First Connection – International Student Orientation.

Exercise 1

TREE OF LIFE TRANSITION EXERCISE

This exercise is designed to assist students understand their experience of transition and what is needed to help them settle in.

Arthur 2004 Counselling International Students

Transitions involve a process in which individuals experience a shift in their personal assumptions or worldview...(P18)

Aspects of a transition are :

- 1) Loss of many life factors such as :
 - Familiar ways of operating and routines
 - Familiar beliefs
 - Familiar surroundings and lifestyles
- 2) Exposure to

- Behaviours and values that contrast with one's own culture
 - Experiences that challenge one's own belief systems
- 3) Challenge to ones :
- understanding of self,
 - assumptions about others
 - and beliefs about the world

Explanation of the Tree of Life

Participants form groups with people they don't already know to discuss the roots.

Feedback to the big group

Further group discussion about what will support them here.

Short discussion of the value of this exercise – question and comments

Exercise 2

WELCOME TO AUSTRALIA – what you need to know that nobody tells you.

This exercise is designed to assist International students understand what is expected of them when interacting in groups. After we have tried the exercise we can discuss the principles being highlighted through this activity.

Get into groups with people you don't know.

Explain Australian context

Hand out beach towels and tennis balls.

Do the exercise

Feedback.

Ask participants :-

What was that experience like for you ?

What did you notice about this experience ?

What personal qualities important for group interaction are being highlighted through this activity ?

Discuss with the group the qualities that are being emphasised in this exercise.

Explain what I say after they have finished the exercise

Comments and questions

Student Feedback

Describe the student feedback from these workshops. No longitudinal studies but hope to do this as part of my Prof. Doc next year.

Comments on the application of the psychosocial approach.

I have chosen to present these principles through shared experiences for a number of reasons.

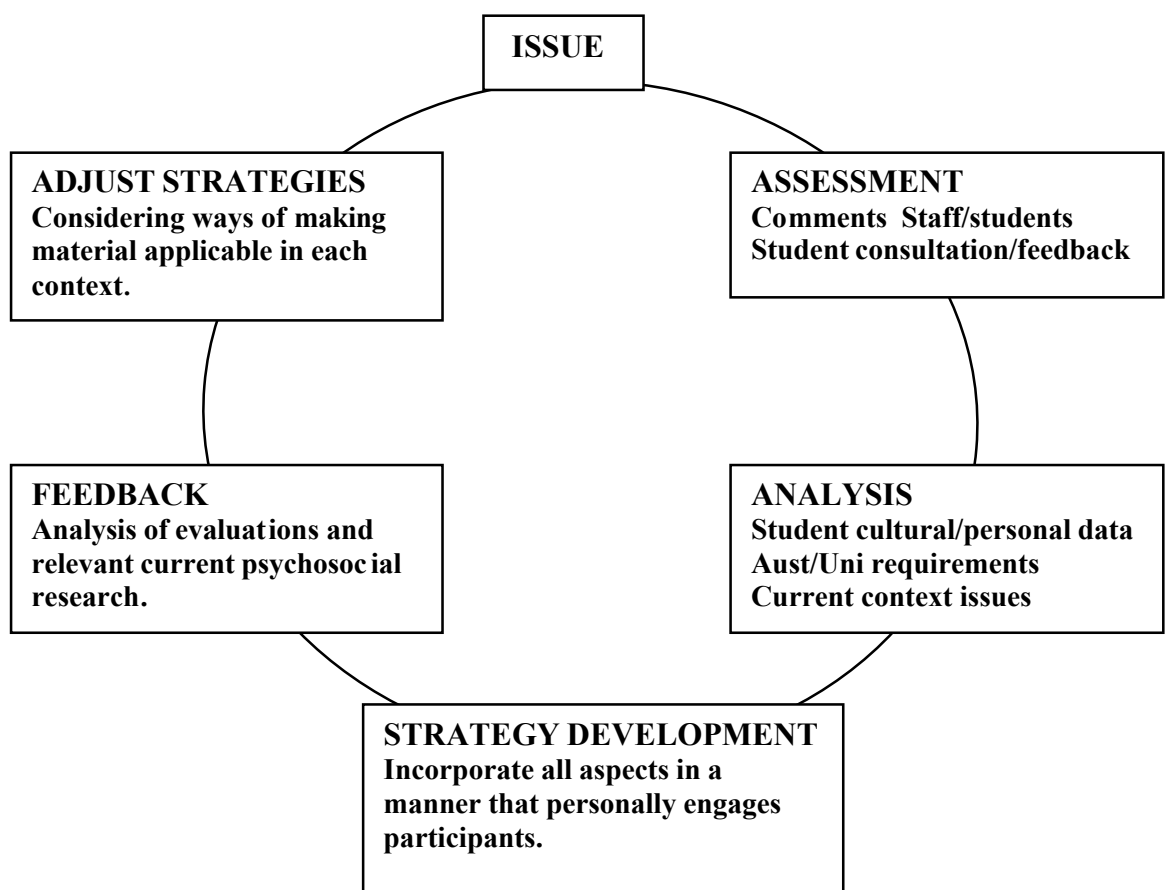
- An opportunity to promote networking
- A way of involving everyone relatively equally
- Comprehension is not dependant on the student's ability to understand the spoken word – which is very important for students who have only just arrived and are adapting to accents and work use.

- Increases engagement through the use of tasks that are well within the range of all participants therefore assisting in developing a comfort zone (recognition of shared capacities) for them
- Gives them a memorable experience that anchors the concepts both visually and physically.
- Respects the principles of adult learning as outlined by Paulo Freire re building new information upon individual's personal abilities.

EVALUATION

It is important to be reflective and continue to monitor and develop strategies - fine tuning the techniques to each particular setting and group. The following diagram shows the methodology we in the Counselling Team for International Students at UniSA have developed to facilitate the process.

Diagram of the active research used in a psychosocial approach.



CONCLUSION

A psychosocial approach is a valuable methodology when working across cultures. It employs both adult learning principles and an active research approach to ensure two outcomes

1. Students engage with the issue in a meaningful and productive manner.
2. Strategies are delivered in culturally and personally appropriate ways.

The rationale is that students will gain relevant skills and understanding more quickly and thoroughly by matching their expressed needs and style to appropriate vehicles for learning. These could be a community initiative such as Network Mawson Lakes, a group activity such as Welcome to Australia or a classroom experience such as the Tree of Life.

