

Relationships and Friendships across Cultures: Using ‘story telling’ to engage new international students in conversations about friendships, relationships and sexuality.

Borrett, Kate
International Student Advisory Services
University of South Australia
Adelaide, Australia
Email: kate.borrett@unisa.edu.au

Zysk, Ania
Counselling Services
University of South Australia
Adelaide, Australia
Email: ania.zysk@unisa.edu.au

Abstract

Talking about sexuality, relationships and friendships may be perceived as a ‘taboo’ topic of conversation in many cultures. This poses a challenge for engaging international students and in providing education on sexual health and the negotiation of healthy relationships. As part of their orientation activities, commencing international students at UniSA were invited to attend a forum on relationships and friendships across cultures on 14 February 2007. The forum was held as part of Valentine’s Day celebrations and Sexual Health Awareness Week and was followed by a morning tea where SHine SA provided information about sexual health and relationships.

This paper describes an educative model that utilises ‘story telling’ to engage international students in discussion about relationships and friendships in their new University and cultural environment. It offers a format by which students can seek information in a culturally appropriate and sensitive manner. It also explores the possibilities for student engagement and the shared moments that occur outside the formal classroom environment.

Keywords

International students, sexual health, cross-cultural relationships, cross-cultural friendships, student engagement, story telling

Introduction

International students encounter a range of challenges in their first study period in a new country. They are expected to make transitions to new educational, cultural and social environments. Current tertiary orientation programs have a strong focus on assisting students to develop the necessary skills and knowledge to manage these educational and cultural transitions and develop new support networks. There is extensive literature that supports the importance of social support for students’ psychological wellbeing during cross-cultural transitions (Feinstein & Ward, 1990; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Support that results in networking and friendships is an important factor that reduces stress during students’ adjustment period (Thomson, Rosenthal, Russel, 2006).

There are a range of social transitions that international students need to make. As staff from the University of South Australia’s student support service we do not so much expect as aspire for new overseas students to feel comfortable to interact with a diverse group of people that they have not met before. During their period of transition, we hope that students’ develop friendships across cultures, manage their relationships with family and peers at home and engage in social settings that may be different to what they are used to.

The experience of being away from home may be students’ first opportunity to explore a freedom without the restrictions, expectations and familial obligations that may exist in a home culture at an age when they are often developing their identity (Koehne, 2005, p.115). This period of transition may therefore be students’ first opportunity to explore a range of relationships including intimate relationships. While all of this is happening, students are placed in a cultural setting where the rules for social engagement may be significantly different and

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unfamiliar to what they have experienced at home. In addition, students may not have the same level of social support as exists in their home culture.

Margaret Edmund (1996) highlights that, by virtue of changing cultures, international students experience social difficulty resulting from not knowing the rules and nuances of communication and behaviour in the new culture. This is especially significant in intimate sexual relationships. The challenge for students in this new environment is to learn the new rules for engagement. Orientation programs for international students prepare students for studying and living in a new culture. However, should we also talk with international students about relationships and friendships and sexuality across cultures?

Why talk to new students about relationships, friendships and sexual health?

We became interested in the topic of relationships, sexual health and international students in 2005 when a representative from the university's preferred Overseas Student Health Cover provider expressed concern about the number of international students who had very little knowledge about sexual health and contraception. In addition, we were provided with data which indicated that during an 18 month period beginning from July 2004 there were 17 international students who had a termination of pregnancy at one Adelaide clinic. Two of these students had undergone 2 terminations in a 60 day period. Counselling staff at the clinic expressed a concern that some students they were seeing had a very limited knowledge of contraception and engaged in relationships where they felt that they were unable to say 'no' to sexual advances.

A search of literature in this area revealed that there is very little research about relationships, sexual health and international students. Where research has been conducted, it is usually part of larger projects, thereby overlooking or not providing a sufficiently detailed picture of the situation for international students. For example, a study of the health and wellbeing of international students at the University of Melbourne by Thomson, Rosenthal and Russel, (2006), reported that 38 per cent of the 979 students that responded to the survey indicated that they were sexually active, and only half said that they always used condoms. Mahat (1995) in his Queensland research also found that international students were at high risk of contracting HIV because many were sexually active and experimental owing to freedom from family and community surveillance in Australia. Mahat also identified that participants in his research project had a limited knowledge of sexual health issues.

This research confirms that many international students are sexually active and have limited access to education about sexual health and contraception. In response to these concerns UniSA invited the Sexual Health Information Networking and Education of SA (SHine SA) to present an information session on sexual health as part of the orientation program offered to new students at the beginning of 2006. As the lead sexual health agency in South Australia, Shine SA staff provided resources on the enjoyment of relationships and sexual health with safety, pleasure and respect. These sessions received very positive feedback from students. They are now incorporated into the orientation program for international students on a regular basis. What we learnt from these sessions is that some students from countries in Asia and the sub continent receive very little information about sexual health and relationships before they arrive in Australia but that they want to know more upon their arrival. Students from the United States of America, Canada and Europe reported that the information they receive about sexual health, during their orientation program, was too basic and was already covered before leaving their home country.

In addition, we had access to anecdotal evidence and data from the counselling service, at UniSA, that indicated international students experienced a range of relationship difficulties in their new cultural setting. In 2005, the counselling service at UniSA recorded 98 contacts with international students specifically related to relationship issues and 101 in 2006. When teamed with research which indicates that international students prefer to use family and friends as a means of support for personal problems (Zhai cited in Klomegah (2006)) and only a small percentage would seek help from the counselling service, it led us to believe that these issues were impacting upon a significant number of our international students. Based on the information collected, we concluded that international students needed more than just information and education on sexual health. They also needed an opportunity to develop skills in managing the diversity of relationships that they were likely to encounter in their new educational, social and cultural environments. However, the challenge that presented itself was how do we talk with international students about relationships, friendships and sexuality across cultures?

Engaging international students in discussions about relationships, friendships and sexuality

Owing to the many social and cultural taboos in this area and the fact that international students bring with them a whole range of experiences and knowledge, we wanted to find a way to talk to this diverse group that was culturally appropriate and engaging. An extensive literature search on the subject of international students and cross-cultural relationships, friendships and sexual health failed to locate anything of substance written on the subject. Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli (1997) in her research into sexual health and international students talks about two approaches used, namely information pamphlets and small group seminars. However, she does not provide specific information about the content and format of these resources or how students responded to the two approaches. Borrett and Crowley (2001, p.10) discuss the potential that staging a community event offers for sharing experiences and exploring ideas. Their study examines the possibilities of using a panel or forum model to discuss issues that affect students including bodies, genders and sexualities to develop analysis that is simultaneously playful, exploratory, provocative and hopefully entertaining (Borrett and Crowley, 2001, p.10). This led us to look further and investigate literature on approaches that engage students across cultures.

Krause (2006) argues that any discussion of student engagement must take into consideration contextual factors beyond the university. This includes students' socio-cultural background and experience. Therefore, maintaining a dialogue with students to uphold cross-cultural perspectives on the themes of relationships and friendships with housemates, long-distance relationships, relationships with family and friends back home and stories of landing in a different cultural environment offers a strategic approach to involving and engaging international students in their first year within a new university community. Krause (2006, p.8) suggests that integrating first year students into the university learning community is one approach for creating a sense of belonging that is conducive to enhanced engagement, satisfaction with learning and commitment to study. She maintains that in order 'to make engagement meaningful we should prepare, support and empower students with strategies to build on positive engagement experiences as well as manage the conflicts which inevitably arise from attempts to engage with the challenge of university study' (Krause, 2005, p.9).

Fundamental to a student's ability to engage with the institution is their ability to build relationships and connections with their peers and staff and engaging 'may sometimes mean reshaping identity, letting go of long-held beliefs and approaches to learning and social interaction' (Kraus, 2005, p.7). Koehne (2005, p.111) writes that 'international students often relate to other international students through their shared experiences'. This is especially significant for new international students who experience rapid changes with regard to perceptions of their identity and as their understanding of the world is challenged in an attempt to integrate into the social and academic life of an Australian university. The knowledge and wisdom of senior peers is important and respected by international students. It is this notion of senior students sharing their personal experiences and reflections that underpins our decision to use story-telling as a vehicle to engage students.

Why utilise 'story telling' as a means to engage students?

The concept of 'story telling' involves the pleasure of engagement which is expressed through shared, often intense, moments of various kinds. Story telling is also intrinsic to themes of learning, change, identity and culture. Allen and Doherty (2004, p.158) discuss the idea of identity as being reconstructed through a process of constructing personal life stories, and with them the meaning of the teller's past and future action in the world. Thus, self narrative represents an opportunity for students to express significant life events and experiences. Allen and Doherty (2004, p.164) identify the specific functions of story telling as engaging, focussing and shifting attention, while supporting memory, reflection and signalling membership. It is this idea of membership and community that experiences, of varying kinds, both shape and mark that is of particular interest within the context of our project. As nee-Benham & Cooper (cited in Allen and Doherty, 2004, p.174-175) suggest, 'shared narratives are valuable tools for us to make sense of our changing worlds'.

Story telling then represents threads that have the potential to connect stories represented by senior peers with commencing students' own self-narrative and experiences thus helping to develop networks and possibilities for friendship and engagement. As Koehne (2005, p.104) suggests, by acknowledging and celebrating the diversity of subjectivities that international students (re)construct we may then begin a process of exploring international education out of limited and constricted binarisms. Pomerantz (1997, p.5) suggests that the process of engaging students to tell their stories creates a story telling process in itself. She suggests that such story telling helps to create 'structures of expectation' within cross-cultural exchanges and research.

The Relationships and Friendships across Cultures forum

These ideas lead us to explore a range of topics and themes focused on negotiating healthy relationships and friendships in a forum format which we named *Relationships and Friendships across Cultures*. The aims of the forum were to:

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- enable the discussion of cultural norms with regard to cross-cultural relationships and friendships;
- raise awareness for students about where to go to find further information and seek support if they need;
- provide a clear message to new students that it is okay to talk about relationships in Australia; and
- raise awareness among new students about the range of friendships and relationships that they may experience during their time in Adelaide and some strategies for managing these.

The event formed part of a Valentines Day celebration and Sexual Health Awareness Week activities in Adelaide. The forum was publicised on the university's website, in commencing international students' orientation to UniSA programs and in welcome areas on UniSA's four metropolitan campuses. Funding, to the amount of \$500.00, was obtained from SHine SA as part of their Sexual Health Awareness Week Community Grants Scheme.

Orientation for international students at UniSA consists of a one week program that focuses on cultural, social and academic aspects of student transition. The forum was included as part of the Wednesday, or mid-week, program which is dedicated to workshops on living in Adelaide and cultural adjustment. The forum was scheduled as a mid-morning event, and followed a *Welcome to Australia* workshop, facilitated by counselling staff at Learning Connection, that offers advice about how to get started as a student in Adelaide including what behaviours are expected and how to interact with locals and university staff. The forum was followed by a morning tea, funded by SHine SA, where students were able to pick up information about healthy relationships and seek further information from SHine SA staff.

The *Relationships and Friendships across Cultures* forum was a prelude to a workshop that focuses on students' health and wellbeing, co-facilitated by staff from the International Student Advisory Services and SHine SA. This latter workshop features information on relationships and sexual health for students and provides advice about medical services in Adelaide including how to live healthily while studying. The *Relationships and Friendships across Cultures* forum therefore provided an important anchor to UniSA's living in Adelaide workshop program and engaged students in discussion about various themes related to making their transition to a new culture and to living and studying in Adelaide.

As a low budget and low cost event to the university, the forum was held in a lecture theatre with an informal atmosphere. Preparations involved a preliminary meeting of organisers, the chair and panellists with an opportunity to exchange introductions and to rehearse topics for discussion. During this initial preparation, panellists were provided with a chance to share some of their ideas and stories prior to the forum and to discuss individual and shared personal experiences. The chair and panellists received a full running program prior to the forum event.

On Wednesday 14 February, commencing international students at UniSA were welcomed to Adelaide with an opportunity to come together to listen, share, empower and inform in an enjoyable and entertaining 'story telling' session presented by senior local and international student panellists. The *Relationships and Friendships across Cultures* forum was attended by approximately 200 to 250 students and provided an opportunity for new and current students to experience a selection of stories around particular themes. The themes discussed included representations of experiences of relationships with housemates; family and friends back home; personal development and growth; love in transition and long-distance love. The stories shared reflected the diversity of international students' relationship experiences and provided an occasion by which the medium of 'story telling' itself prompted students to view their own cultural identities as shifting and to consider their own experiences as evolving projects of self-transformation. Talking about oneself and sharing personal stories is a means of opening up spaces in relation to subjectivity. Koehne (2005, p.106) identifies that 'storylines are developed through (re)construction of self as a site of multiple subjectivities, as hybridity, or through resistance to subject positions made available'. Such storylines, as represented in the forum, highlight the diversity of international students' lives and in turn offer possibilities for communicating and informing discursive practices within a university environment that speak across cultural boundaries.

The forum was chaired by a member of the university's counselling team and featured a panel of five senior students. Panellists' were recruited to represent a range of stories and experiences and were chosen from different genders and cultural backgrounds. The idea was to bring together a group of students, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, to speak on topics or themes that were of personal interest and relevance. The only common criteria were that they were a good speaker and felt comfortable in telling a good 'yarn' or story. The forum was structured in individual rounds with specific themes and ran for approximately forty minutes with fifteen to twenty minutes for questions and further discussion. Panellists' spoke about their personal experiences of relationships and friendships while studying in Australia and overseas while offering tips and information about negotiating relationships. Stories were wide-ranging and included discussion on the complexities of cross-cultural desire and the subtle negotiations that take place when communicating about these relationships with family and friends back home. There was also a sharing of the diversity of experiences encountered by students while in share-house accommodation.

The event itself was followed by a free morning-tea which included Valentine's Day theme biscuits with heart shaped icing decorated with hundreds and thousands. Rose coloured, helium filled balloons were suspended from the ceiling in the adjacent lecture theatre foyer to create a welcoming ambiance and canopy to Valentines Day celebrations. Staff from SHine SA were identifiable during the morning tea and available to discuss issues about sexual health and relationships for students wishing to pursue further information.

What feedback did we receive from evaluating the forum?

The forum was evaluated using the TellUs2 online survey instrument. This instrument was used to evaluate new international students' perceptions of the entire orientation program in study period 2, 2007. The survey was emailed to commencing international students three weeks after their orientation and included a total of 79 questions, 5 of which were devoted to eliciting feedback specifically about the forum (see Appendix 1). The survey results indicate that of the 41 respondents who attended the *Friendships and Relationships across Cultures* Valentine's Day forum, a majority of 65 per cent thought that having current students share their stories and experiences of relationships and friendships across cultures was a good way of learning about these topics while 23 per cent were unsure and 11 per cent disagreed. This evidence suggests that opportunities for student engagement are paramount at the time students commence their orientation program and have the potential to impact on students' perceptions about such topic areas. The feedback received in relation to the 34 per cent of students, who were either unsure or disagreed, suggests that the notion of students sharing their stories about relationships and friendships across cultures may not have been something that they expected, nor were familiar with or comfortable discussing given their current experiences.

Of the respondents, 55 per cent indicated that the topics discussed were useful and relevant to them, while 31 per cent were unsure and 14 per cent disagreed. Students were asked to select the topics that were most useful to them from a list of nine. The top five topics were:

- relationships with family and friends back home;
- personal growth and development as a result of the experience;
- relationships with house mates;
- different cultural relationships; and
- stories of landing in a different environment.

Students were also invited to comment, in the online evaluation, about the speakers and the forum itself. Comments indicate that the students really enjoyed the speakers and were engaged in the way that the session was presented. Anecdotal feedback collected from students reveals the following impressions:

The speakers were all very entertaining and the way they all shared their experiences was just awesome!!!

All the students speaking on that day were very amusing, experienced and confident. Generally that's what makes the forum interesting altogether, especially their talk on experiences.

These comments highlight the importance of humour and a sense of fun to help students engage with such topics. In addition, new students appreciated the openness and honesty with which panellists shared their accounts of living and studying in Adelaide and overseas and found the information useful to their own experiences:

They were all good, honest about their experiences and spoke in a way that didn't bore students at all.

It helped us to learn how to make friends and how to get on well with life in Australia.

How do panellists perceive the sharing their experiences with new international students?

The openness and honesty of the presenters reveals possibilities for relating to international students as a group through the notion of shared experiences. Part of the success of this kind of forum is that it builds on the sense of the ordinary and extraordinary within international students' lives. As panellists indicate, the motivations for participating in such a forum have far-reaching benefits for all, when using a model of story telling and personal experiences to engage new students. Feedback received from our student panellists, following the forum, includes the following anecdotal comments:

In terms of my motivation, I thought it was important for students to hear about relationship issues from people who can relate, as I've seen many forms of relationships form (to varying degrees of success) through my time

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at UniSA and being involved with exchange/international students. It was also encouraging for me that it was done in a candid and light-hearted manner.

In speaking, I mostly felt like I was helping the students, and was able to impart some of my observations for their benefit.

I felt all of us reached a similar conclusion though we started from a different direction. We all need to communicate more and more if we want to overcome any issues involved with being an outsider.

It was great to share some of my experiences (not exactly in Love and Valentine's Day though! haha) of being away from home.

Thanks for the opportunity to share our experiences with the new group. I hope our experiences help them in their decision making process and hopefully they all have a great time in Adelaide.

The pleasure is mine. It always feels wonderful to be able to share a bit of what we have to others.

The feedback highlights that this type of format has benefits for both participants and panellists as it builds a sense of community where individuals can contribute something valuable via their experience. Butler (cited in Allen and Doherty 2004, p.164) makes the point that, 'one's story is always in relation to the stories of others, influencing the evolving sense of self'. Here then, represents an opportunity for friendship formation and cross-cultural exchange even before students begin the formal component of their university education. The experiential model used within the forum created a common bond from which students were able to compare ideas, experiences and desires and develop strategies for managing change. By engaging new international students in the processes of story-telling, students were able to support one another into what Koehne (2005, p.112) calls their 'storylines'.

By having an opportunity to explore ideas and ask questions new international students were afforded the insights of senior students' impressions of how they may have personally developed and evolved from the experiences they have encountered by being students overseas. Listening to stories about the negotiation of healthy relationships and friendships thus offers students a chance to reinvent 'the self' and with this comes a sense of freedom. Koehne (2005, p.114-115) attributes the opportunities to talk about and 're-invent' the self and the discontinuity of going overseas into a new culture as a means of providing the space for international students to speak themselves as a different person and to leave behind traces of the past that they wish to delete from their storyline.

Conclusion

This forum format represents an educative model that offers possibilities for student engagement and shared moments that may occur beyond the classroom and within cross-cultural spaces provided by orientation programs. Such a format has the potential to be incorporated in a number of other educational contexts at the program and course level. Possibilities exist for local and international students, of all levels, to implement a similar style of forum program on any number of topics to do with their experiences and to develop analysis that is entertaining, exploratory and diverse for both participants and presenters.

Using peers to communicate information to new international students is a strategy that has benefits that far outweigh the delivery of information by university staff alone. Feedback received on the *Relationships and Friendships across Cultures* forum indicates that the opportunity for peers to share their personal stories and impart knowledge to fellow students, on a range of issues, is crucial to the uptake of information by new international students. Such a strategy reinforces the notion that what is of most importance in this model of communication is 'who' does the story telling. The sharing of experiences and observations among peers is an important part of knowledge dissemination as much as it is about creating opportunities for fostering a sense of community and shared understandings across cultures. The use of peers to engage students during a time of transition and adjustment also facilitates the delivery of information in a way that students can directly relate in an honest and light-hearted approach.

The success of such an event reveals that attempts to talk about relationships, friendships and sexuality in an entertaining and informative way can lead to opportunities for creating more sustainable student engagement within a number of tertiary education environments and learning cultures (Borrett and Crowley, 2001, p.7). We have learnt that information about healthy relationships and friendships during the transition period is important for commencing international students and needs to be incorporated into their orientation program. We aim to incorporate material on negotiating healthy relationships and friendships across cultures into a similar style

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forum for commencing international students during their orientation to UniSA program in study period 2, 2008. As only a percentage of commencing students attended the forum we intend to increase access to such information, in the future, by developing an online resource for students. SHine SA has commended the joint initiative of the International Student Advisory Services and Counselling Services. As a result of feedback received from this year's forum we intend to apply for another Sexual Health Awareness Week Community Grant in 2008.

Finally, finding creative ways to engage international students is a challenge faced by many educators. This model demonstrates that storytelling is a useful pedagogical practice that provides opportunities for new international students to gain critical insights that allow opportunities to explore personal narrative as well as shared moments. The cross-cultural exchange made possible by the forum format offers a means of opening up other worlds and ways of thinking and engaging for international and local students. Such ways of engaging can be safe moments in the public expression of both private and public experiences, particularly in relation to talking about sexual health and healthy relationships. We hope that the opportunity provided by this forum enables students to share and talk about multiple and varied subject positions in ways that not only offer a useful education resource for new international students but that also helps to weave the threads within students' lives.

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Appendix 1

Orientation to UniSA for International Students study period 2, 2007 online survey questions

- Did you attend the *Relationships and Friendships across Cultures Valentine's Day* forum and free morning tea at City East campus on 14 February?
- Having current students sharing their stories and experiences of relationships and friendships across cultures was a good way of learning about these topics. (Strongly agree; Agree; Unsure; Disagree; Strongly disagree)
- The topic areas included for discussion were useful and relevant to me. (Strongly agree; Agree; Unsure; Disagree; Strongly disagree)
- Which topic areas did you find the most useful for advice on healthy relationships and friendships? (You may select more than one topic area from the dropdown list below: share houses; relationships with house mates; different cultural relationships; long-distance relationships; relationships with family and friends back home; personal development and growth as a result of experience; love in 'translation'; exchange experiences; stories of landing in a different cultural environment).
- Please comment about any of the speakers or any part of the *Relationships and Friendships across Cultures* forum that you enjoyed the most?