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Cross-Cultural Training for Orientation Student Leaders

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Abstract

Acculturating sojourners such as new international students are faced with a myriad of challenges in psychological and sociocultural adjustments on arrival. These newcomers' transition to university life can be made easier with social support from not only staff but also other students in their host institutions. However, many local students have only limited understanding of international students' initial cultural shock in a foreign university, and are unsure about how to help these newcomers. This paper will report the recent implementation and evaluation of a one-day cross-cultural training course, presented as an interactive psycho-educational workshop, designed to prepare senior student volunteers for making effective social contact with and helping international students during Orientation Week at the University of Canberra. The Intercultural Social Contact Course aims to increase Orientation Week Leaders' awareness and knowledge of cultural diversity and intercultural communication, and deepen their understanding of the needs of new culturally diverse students in their transition to university life. The training further encourages the student leaders to reflect on and apply their learning to enhance their own interactions with culturally different others. This paper will include the student leaders' feedback on the training received and their attitudes towards helping newcomers and working with culturally and diverse people at the end of the Orientation Week.

Introduction

Australian higher education has been experiencing a trend towards significant increases in the number of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students as a result of Australia's substantial skilled immigration intake and particularly the continued growth of its international student numbers. In 2006, the number of commencing onshore international student enrolments in Australian higher education alone was 69,082 (AEI, 2007). Moreover, the top 10 source countries of international students were all from Asia, countries that are culturally and linguistically different from Australia but which are increasingly recognised as vital for Australia's economy and political alignments.

Challenges and Benefits of Cultural Diversity in Higher Education

Acculturating sojourners, such as new Asian international students in Australia, are faced with a myriad of challenges in psychological and sociocultural adjustments in making their transition to a foreign university (Ward, 2006). These international students' academic and social transition to university life can be made easier with learning support from staff as well as social support from other students in their host institutions (Dawson & Conti-Bekkers, 2002; Neil & Mak, in press, Ward). However, Australian and New Zealand research (Smart, Volet, & Ang, 2000; Todd & Nesdale, 1997; Ward) has shown disappointingly low levels of interactions between international and local students, which are lower than what international students would typically desire in their overseas studies. Sadly, many international students perceive that local students are uninformed and disinterested in their original culture, and unenthusiastic in forming intercultural friendships (Ward).

Possible reasons for domestic students' apparent lack of initiative and enthusiasm in making friends with international students from CALD background include negative intercultural communication emotion in interacting with visibly different others who speak with an accent (Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002), differing preferred styles in learning and communication in multicultural classes (Ho et al., 2004), and the fundamental individualism-collectivism divide (Tan & Goh, 2006).

It would be a waste of opportunities if Australian students could not take advantage of the increasing cultural diversity in higher education to learn about other cultures from international students, develop an international perspective, and prepare themselves to function in an intercultural context (Leask, 2005; Volet & Ang, 1998). Ward's (2006) review of the relevant literature suggests that the contact between international and local students is strongly related to perceptions and attitudes, and the relationship is likely to be a bi-directional one. Australian research has highlighted the role of communication in the processes of intercultural

friendship formation in higher education (Kudo & Simkin, 2003), and how promoting contact between Australian and international university students in orientation program, recreational activities and tutorial system based in halls of residences, could enhance intercultural knowledge and acceptance (Todd & Nesdale, 1997).

It is conceivable that even when Australian students are willing to reach out to new Asian international students and make them feel welcome, the former may not be fully aware of the needs and experiences of these newcomers and often have little understanding of the impact of cultural differences and barriers in intercultural communication on the newcomers' adjustment. At the University of Canberra (UC), we observed that some of the senior students volunteering their time as Orientation previous Week Student Leaders (OWLS) at UC were unsure about how they could approach and offer assistance to Asian international students.

Strategic Intercultural Social Contact Training

In planning for induction of new students in 2007, Professor Sharon Bell, Deputy Vice-Chancellor at UC, identified the need to devise and deliver strategic intercultural training to prepare Orientation Week Leaders (OWLS) for assisting new international students during the university's Orientation Week. Subsequently the author has designed and delivered a one-day Intercultural Social Contact@UC Course aimed at increasing the OWLS' awareness and knowledge of cultural diversity, and deepen their understanding of the needs of international students in their transition to university life.

This innovative Intercultural Training module complemented the regular OWL training module (three-quarters of a day) to prepare senior student volunteers helping all the new students, in functional areas such as conduct of guided campus tours, assistance with course enrolment, orientation for new residents in the halls, and banking. Both training modules were completed in the week just prior to the University's Orientation Week (offering integrated induction for both international and local students), so the OWLS were able to put their training into practice to help newcomers while it was still fresh.

Learning outcomes of the Intercultural Social Contact@UC training module pertain to increased understanding in various cross-cultural content areas. These are: reality and benefits of cultural diversity, challenges faced by CALD newcomers, conditions for effective intercultural contact, barriers in intercultural communication, dimensions of cultural differences, the ABCD stages for analysing intercultural social interactions, applications in enhancing own interactions with culturally different others, applications in assisting new students' transition to university life, and strategies for assisting new students' transition to university life.

The ABCD stages for analyzing social interactions are adapted from the EXCELL (Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership) Program, an evidence-based program initially developed by the author along with three other psychologists for developing international students' sociocultural competencies (see Mak, Westwood, Barker, & Ishiyama, 1998). A segment in the Intercultural Social Contact@UC workshop is based on a schematic framework (called Cultural Mapping) of the Approach, Bridging, Commenting, and Developing (or ABCD) stages of seeking help in the Australian university culture, compared with seeking help in other cultures that new students are more familiar with (see Mak et al., 1998).

The cross-cultural training provided to the Orientation student leaders was in the form of an interactive psycho-educational workshop, incorporating mini-lectures, brief exercises, dyadic activities, and small group discussion, and including various opportunities for experiential learning and reflections on learning and applications. The research presented in this paper was an evaluation of the pilot trial of the Intercultural Social Contact@UC Workshop in February, 2007.

Method

Participants

Participants of the program evaluation were 19 Orientation Week Leaders (OWLS) at the University of Canberra (UC) who participated in the one-day Intercultural Social Contact@UC Workshop. Of these participants, six were male and 13 were female. Their ages ranged from 19 to 40 years, with $M = 24.68$ years ($SD = 6.00$). There were 17 Australian students (five of whom were overseas-born) and two international students (one was an Anglo-American and the other an ethnic Chinese from Taiwan). They were second to fourth year students at UC, and were enrolled in a wide range of courses across all three academic divisions.

Evaluation Questions

At the end of the Intercultural Training day, the Workshop evaluation form surveyed the participants' reactions to the training, as well as their learning from the Workshop. Reactions were assessed with items on the overall evaluation of the Workshop (5-point Likert-type scales, where 1 = Poor, 2 = Fair, 3 = Average, 4 = Good, and 5 = Excellent) and the usefulness of the Workshop in increasing knowledge in a number of content areas (also 5-point Likert-type scales).

Additional assessment of reactions were open-ended questions on the most and least useful parts of the Workshop, and whether the participant would recommend Workshop to others (if yes, to whom), and why. The Workshop evaluation form also had open-

ended questions on participants' learning and intended applications to their intercultural interactions.

At the end of the Orientation Week, the OWLS were asked to indicate, on 2 thermometer scales (from 0 to 100), their overall willingness and readiness towards helping newcomers and working among CALD people.

Procedure

The OWLS in this research had responded earlier to a university-wide advertisement (using both posters and online advertising in the University's Online Students' Information System), inviting interested students to undertake intercultural training in order to assist new students from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Prior to the beginning of the intercultural training, informed consent was obtained from all the participating OWLS to participate in an anonymous and voluntary evaluation of the Workshop and their experiences during O Week. Subsequently, the OWLS were invited to complete a Workshop evaluation survey at the end of the training day, and then an end-of-O Week survey in the following week at a social event where they were presented with their OWLS certificates. Each survey took between 5 to 10 minutes to complete.

Results

Overall mean ratings at the end of the Intercultural Social Contact Workshop were very favourable. Participants' mean rating for "Overall evaluation of the workshop" was 4.34 ($SD = 0.47$), out of possible ratings from 1 to 5 (where 1 = Poor, 2 = Fair, 3 = Average, 4 = Good, and 5 = Excellent).

Similarly, "Value of workshop for personal development" was rated highly, with $M = 4.32$ ($SD = 0.75$). The mean rating for "Facilitator's ability to explain" was especially high, with $M = 4.68$ ($SD = 0.58$).

Reactions at End of Workshop

Table 1 presents the participants' ratings of the usefulness of the Workshop in increasing their knowledge in each of a number of content areas, again on 5-point scales, with 1 = Poor, and 5 = Excellent. A clear majority of Orientation Student Leaders found the Workshop to be good or excellent in increasing their knowledge in each of the content areas.

The senior students appeared to have found coverage of several components to be particularly useful, including the challenges of cultural diversity, the EXCELL ABCD phases of social interaction, barriers in intercultural communication, understanding international students' needs, and supporting international students. However, participants perceived a relatively low level of increase in knowledge

regarding "Making friends with culturally different others".

Table 1: Ratings of Workshop's usefulness in increasing knowledge.

Content area	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Benefits of cultural diversity	4.08	.63
Challenges of cultural diversity	4.34	.75
Conditions for favourable contact	4.18	.51
Barriers in communication	4.18	.84
Dimensions of cultural differences	4.05	.91
ABCD phases of social interaction	4.32	.75
Importance of cultural effectiveness	4.05	.85
Communicating with cultural others	4.00	.82
Making friends with cultural others	3.79	.85
Assisting new students	4.11	.88
Understanding international students' needs	4.34	.58
Supporting international students	4.29	.65

Learnings and Intended Applications at End of Workshop

Thematic analysis was conducted of participants' responses to an open-ended question on one learning that they might apply to enhance their interactions with people who are culturally different. Themes that emerged pertain to dimensions of cultural differences (4), importance of greater patience, speaking clearly, and being positive (4), the need to broaden own thinking and reserve judgment (3), practical ways to help new international students and make others feel comfortable in seeking help (3), methods for overcoming cultural barriers (3), and awareness of own actions on others (2).

A wide range of applications was delineated when participants were asked to reflect on how they might apply this learning. These applications were related to interacting with international students (4 mentions), interacting with newcomers in general (3), participants' own verbal and non-verbal communications (4), and their own self-improvement (8).

Specifically, intended applications of learning to interactions with international students included "by approaching an international student if they (sic) look confused/lost", "getting to know international students on a more personal level, that is, learning new interests and view points", and "by approaching more international students and letting them all know that we are here and ready to help and support them".

In terms of interacting with newcomers in general, senior students' intended applications included "making the effort to say hello, take an interest in their cultural

background and help them where I can.”, and “if a student is asking me about a tutorial etc., first understand what they are really asking”.

It is also interesting to note the student leaders’ perceptions of how they might apply their learning to their own self-improvement. They described these applications as beneficial to their personal and professional goals: “for my own health, study, and social interaction benefits”, “studying and working”, “when I’m at work or university and meeting new people”, and “in understanding why people can act so differently from each other in the same situation – very important in my future career”.

Other student leaders expressed self-improvement in terms of increased intercultural awareness, such as “being aware of barriers and using methods to overcome them”, “by not stereotyping people and getting to know them for who they are, not where they’re from”, “identifying differences much easier (sic), and understanding is the key to awareness”.

Most and Least Useful Parts of Workshop

Participating student leaders referred to various critical components of the Intercultural Social Contact Workshop as the most useful parts of the Workshop. Themes that emerged could be classified as: group discussion and exercises (8 mentions), understanding cultural differences and barriers (6), practical communication skills (2), learning the challenges faced by international students (1), awareness of actions required (1), and EXCELL theory (1).

Specifically, group activities were valued because of “hearing the different opinions and attitudes within the group”, “brainstorming issues”, and “discussions about how we can break down the barriers”. Learning about cultural differences/barriers was particularly useful because it enhanced understanding of the “barriers between domestic and international students”, “demonstrating the differences in cultures can be uplifting”, and “difference in Western and Asian cultures. Australians really need to understand our neighbours”.

Only 6 participants commented on the least useful parts of the workshop. Three senior students referred to their prior familiarity with certain aspects of the workshop; for example, one participant had already learnt about the dimensions of cultures in an academic subject on international marketing. Two people felt that the discussion on breaking down barriers was not specific enough to be useful. One person did not find an ice-breaker activity to be useful.

Recommendations of Workshop to Others

All the participants stated that they would recommend the Intercultural Social Contact Workshop to other people. These would include people who would want to become OWLS, all residents on campus, any student wishing to understand why international students act the

way they do, people with few or no social skills, student teachers, anyone who stereotype people, anyone with an interest in leadership or communication, friends/colleagues who would value this knowledge in their careers, friends who are interested in helping others and learning from differences, and adults who “have little understanding of cultural tolerance but who are willing to learn about it”. Importantly, various participating senior students would also recommend the workshop to all students, lecturers and tutors, and other staff to “help them understand international students better” and because “it is useful information and raises awareness”. One participant stated that “it would be beneficial for all university students to do this workshop. It is a shame that I have never done this before...This workshop helps to break down the barriers that exist between local and international students”.

Attitudes at End of Orientation Week

In a brief survey at the end of O Week, 18 (out of the original 19) OWLS indicated their attitudes towards working with people on two separate thermometer scales (from 0 to 100). The first scale, which assessed their overall willingness and readiness to help newcomers, yielded a mean reading of 90.94 (SD = 11.01). The second scale, on overall willingness and readiness to work among people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, had a mean rating of 90.00 (SD = 17.73).

Discussion

The Orientation Student Leaders’ reactions and learning reflections at the end of the Intercultural Social Contact Course, suggest that the training received and subsequent real-life intercultural contact experiences, have increased the leaders’ awareness and knowledge of cultural diversity in Australian higher education, and deepen their understanding of the needs of new international students’ transition to university life. The majority of the student leaders have rated very favourably the workshop as a whole and also each of the critical components of the strategic training course.

On reflection, senior students commented that their learning on the dimensions of cultural differences, methods of overcoming cultural barriers, and increased self-awareness, had been particularly useful outcomes of undertaking the training, and could be applied to enhance their interactions with the new (especially international) students, to monitor their own communications so as to meet the newcomers’ needs, to benefit their own study and career goals, and to increase their own intercultural awareness. The participants were also unanimous in recommending the interactive workshop to a range of other people, and definitely other students and perhaps many other people, in view of benefits in increasing cross-cultural awareness, understanding, and tolerance, as well as development of

communication and social skills that will be useful for future careers.

The orientation leaders' very high levels of willingness and readiness to help newcomers, and to work with CALD people, reported at the end of the O Week, are congruent with a strongly positive service attitude in general and also acceptance of people from CALD background. While these responses may be reflective of a self-selection bias on the part of volunteers willing to commit time to attend the additional cross-cultural training module, it appears likely that the real-life experiences of helping new students and engaging in intercultural interactions during O Week have enhanced (or at least maintained) most of the student leaders' attitude towards culturally different others.

Future research evaluating the utility of cross-cultural training for senior students could use a larger sample and include evaluation of actual behaviour (e.g., through observational techniques) and assessment of transfer of learning across differing intercultural interactions on campus (e.g., in classes, clubs, refectory, and halls of residences). Future cross-cultural training could indeed extend to other types of contact between international and local students (e.g., sociocultural training modules delivered in culturally mixed tutorials as part of the curriculum, see Mak & Buckingham, 2007). Favourable conditions of structured intercultural contact that is pleasant, positive, of equal contact, and involving shared goals are conducive to the reduction of cultural stereotypes and prejudice, and could over time encourage the formation of intercultural friendships (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

In summary, strategic intercultural social contact workshops with an experiential learning and psycho-educational focus have the potential to raise local students' awareness of the benefits and challenges of cultural diversity in education and at work, as well as the difficulties that new international students often face. Culturally mixed campuses can serve as naturalistic settings for promoting positive intercultural interactions, thus contributing to local students' personal development in their intercultural effectiveness, and international students' social and emotional wellbeing.

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