Appreciating diversity: Transforming learning communities

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Diversity is an educational asset for all students. This paper outlines a diversity training initiative for rural and international students living in residential college at the University of Newcastle. Colleges provide an ideal setting for exploring models that promote inclusion and appreciation of difference, with potential to enrich first year experience, contribute to effective learning communities and build institutional culture. Students volunteered to participate in a program designed to explore awareness of cultural, gender, sexual and economic diversity and to develop knowledge and skills towards diversity competence and their workforce potential. Training balanced self reflection and peer connection based on both theories of intergroup contact and motivation for social justice. Workshop evaluations and pre and post learning measures were applied together with a follow up query about observed change. The benefits, limitation and flow-on effects of the project are reviewed in terms of future planning.

Equity of access to higher education is fundamental to individual social justice and underpins both UNESCO's World Declaration on Higher Education and the Australian Equity Policy Framework (James, 2008). Widening participation in recent years has led naturally to greater student diversity. Addressing diversity on campus is more critically important than ever before. At the University of Newcastle, we are committed to managing student diversity in informed and responsive ways. This requires a coordinated range of top down and bottom up approaches.

Today we would like to share a 'bottom up' pilot project funded by a 2008 Equity Initiatives Grant from Professor Kevin McConkey DVC Academic and coordinated by Luce Andrews, Residences Manager, Edwards Hall and Barahineban. The project was designed to contribute to an inclusive university culture and campus climate that values diversity. An intended project aim was to support a culture of belonging for all first year students, with clear evidence that those who are marginalised have less opportunity to develop early effective peer support networks and strategies for success (Kinnear, Boyce, Sparrow, Middleton & Cullity, 2008).

The primary focus of the program has been to engage students living in the residences in reflective conversations about diversity and to listen to their voices. We aimed to include students in the university's discourses about diversity, share the institution's efforts to provide a responsive environment and discuss how we could work together for the benefit of all. George Kuh, a leading first year experience researcher, argues the need to articulate campus culture for newcomers and share our maps about how to succeed (Kuh, 2007). Listening to student perspectives and sharing the sectors' equity and diversity maps invites them to become active collaborators. This approach has involved taking risks and a cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting based on action research.

Raising student awareness of diversity at university and the benefits of interacting with diverse peers has far ranging consequences if they are able to adopt a diversity lens and use this intentionally as a learning tool. Peer interaction in and out of the classroom contributes to persistence, achievement, well-being and to rich learning communities (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnes, 2005; Kuh, 2007). Exposure to diversity increases self confidence and critical thinking skills (Chang, Denson, Saenz & Misa, 2006). Diversity capability also relates to future employment prospects. Many employers would like universities to place more emphasis on graduates' ability to work in diverse teams (Hart, 2006). In fact, some professions require diversity competence (Tulman and Watts, 2008). Comfort with diversity prepares our graduates for leadership roles and democratic, global citizenship (Spanierman, Neville, Liao, Hammer & Wang, 2008). The potential benefits for students, universities, the workplace, economy and broader society are far reaching.

Student Support Services are well placed to collaborate across the university and offer one nexus between the organization and student experience. The Residential Colleges are an ideal setting for exploring models that promote inclusion and appreciation of difference. Colleges serve as "community building institutions acting both within the university between students from different faculties and backgrounds and outside with local, national and international communities." (Warrane College Submission to the West Review Committee on University Residential Colleges, 1997, p. 1). As such, they have the potential to enhance the educational experience of residents and the overall student body, with possible flow on effects for community relationships.

Edwards Hall accommodates 374 students, the majority under 21 years of age. New residents comprise 44% of the cohort. There is an equal gender split. Three quarters of residents come from domestic rural areas. A quarter are international students with the most populous countries of origin being the USA, China, Korea, Japan, Zimbabwe, Great Britain, Malaysia, South Africa, France and Singapore. First semester results for 2008 indicated that 89% of the group successfully passed all their courses.

Both international and rural students make significant adjustments to university life and require support (Krause et al, 2005; Student Equity Update to DEST, University of Newcastle, 2007). Recent surveys reveal that international students need more local connections and knowledge (Rosenthal, Russell & Thomson, 2006). Our experience suggests that some rural students also face challenges developing their networks. Many have not been exposed to the same level of diversity as their urban counterparts and may be disadvantaged in this respect. Comfort with difference has potential to foster connection for both groups. A quantitative survey of domestic and international students at the University of Wollongong found that

international students were more comfortable with cultural diversity than many of their local peers (Oades, Caputi & Humpel, 2000).

Research based on intergroup contact theory demonstrates that close contact with different groups reduces uncertainty, fear and prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Voci & Hewstone, 2003). According to Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) "the process underlying contact's ability to reduce prejudice involves the tendency for familiarity to breed liking" (p. 22). Positive effects are heightened when groups come together to learn about many kinds of difference under four optimal conditions; namely, equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation and support from authorities. The diversity program delivered was designed to meet these conditions.

Eight out of ten American colleges offer diversity workshops on their campuses. Both students and administrators believe such initiatives are worthwhile (McCauley, Wright & Harris, 2000). Generally students engaging with these programs express more positive attitudes about difference following their participation (Chang, 2002; Muthuswarmy, Levine & Gazel, 2006). The overall benefits of diversity awareness training for student learning outcomes are supported by the literature. Learning outcomes include greater knowledge of human rights, socio-historical/cultural factors and legal frameworks, more developed self awareness, perspective taking, critical thinking and interpersonal skills as well as reduced prejudice (Nelson Laird, Engberg & Hurtado, 2005; Reason, Terenzini & Domingo, 2007).

Addressing racial prejudice is often a primary focus of diversity training. Two recent programs in Australian Universities show similar promise. Anne Pedersen from the School of Psychology at Murdoch University gave psychology students an opportunity to discuss factual information about Aboriginal Australians during a six week lecture and tutorial series. She reported a significant reduction in students' false beliefs and level of prejudice at post evaluation (Pedersen & Barlow, 2008). A follow up study replicated the result for Aboriginal Australians but found only a marginal reduction in prejudice towards Muslim Australians (Pedersen, Aly, Harley & McGarty, 2008). Malcolm Fialho and Gillian Carter at the University of Western Australia conducted "citizens of the globe" workshops for 270 students in the residences and faculties where groups were invited to examine their relationship to white race privilege. Two colleges included the sessions as part of their student orientation program. Three quarters of those involved stated that the program enhanced their awareness of cultural diversity issues and sixty percent felt more confident to identify and challenge racism (Fialho & Carter, 2006).

Diversity is a more encompassing approach. There are a number of reasons why a diversity paradigm was chosen rather than highlighting racism. We aimed to engage students as partners to reflect on the social justice, equity and diversity principles that "are embedded into all that (our) University aims to achieve" (Equity and Diversity Unit Website, University of Newcastle). We wanted to situate them in the local, national and international contexts for diversity, equity and social justice in higher education, that is, share our University's polices, plans and programs, the Australian Equity Policy Framework for Higher Education and UNESCO's Declaration on Higher Education. Cultural, gender, sexual and economic differences were nominated as the focus for the program. In addition, our university recently adopted the Ally Program which involves a network of staff and students available to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI) people. We also wanted to raise awareness of sexual diversity with the possibility of sharing the Ally program with students living in the residences at a later date. As well, due to the geographical location of our university and successful enabling programs one third of our student body come from low

socioeconomic backgrounds. We wished to acknowledge economic issues as highly relevant to students (James, Bexley & Marginson, 2007) particularly international and rural cohorts, with economic status a significant determinant of access to higher education.

In summary, this project had several aims. These were to open diversity dialogue with the students and hear their views, bring rural and international students together to foster a sense of belonging from their first year of study, trial a diversity program in the residences, share and build university culture based on social justice and equity frameworks, raise students' diversity awareness, knowledge and capacity and develop a workshop package and media resource that could be used within the university. Now we would like to describe the process of consultation and workshop delivery.

Some key administrative and academic staff were consulted about the project in the first instance. We canvassed their opinions about ways the university currently benefits from diversity, areas of success and suggested future directions. Staff expressed interest in the project and some agreed to be filmed in order to share their perspectives about diversity with the students. When included in the package, the vpods will offer students opportunities to identify with messages from university leaders and teachers who value diversity as a cultural norm. The material will also assist students to gain greater understanding of current debates, practices and initiatives and include them as part of this discourse and learning community. A further intention in collaborating with staff was to embed the initiative in a broader vision of change.

A focus group of residential students was invited to share their thoughts about diversity and their learning needs at the time. They were asked to comment on the benefits of studying and living in a diverse community e.g. "getting to hear what people from other places think," any problems that may have arisen e.g. "sometimes it takes forever to help people understand", how the university shows it values diversity e.g. "uses different looking faces on the website" and how we can create an inclusive climate e.g. "maybe have some more celebrations on campus but for other special days." A key theme that emerged was students' lack of understanding about diversity and interest in learning more.

Participants were recruited by an email sent via intranet to all students living in Edwards Hall and Barehineban. The email outlined the nature of the project and invited students to attend an extracurricular full day Diversity Workshop. Eighteen students volunteered and gave their consent to be filmed on the day. The group included a representative mix of students. The program offered students an opportunity to increase their diversity awareness, knowledge and capacity and to reflect on their experiences of commonality and difference. Two principles underpinned the delivery of the program. Consistent with a Values and Awareness Model of Human Rights Education (Tibbitts, 2002 in Brewster, Buckley, Cox & Griep, 2002) the first was engagement as a key pedagogical strategy to foster human rights values as part of our university culture. Secondly, the idea that motivation for social justice rests on a continuum ranging from individualistic self interest (for me) to mutuality (you and me) to interdependent self interest (for us) (Goodman, 2000). Edwards (2006) suggests social justice is not about being powerful and protective or tolerant and altruistic, it's about justice for all.

Workshop delivery was informed by an understanding of the nature of group process, intergroup theory and issues identified as important when attempting to reduce prejudice (Pedersen, Walker & Wise, 2005). Facilitators provided a safe space and modeled respect. Free and open dialogue was encouraged, with differing views accepted. Intergroup contact

was established among diverse peers by both the interpersonal process and type of activities. There was recognition that individuals and groups "are the same and different at the same time" (Pedersen et al, 2005, p. 24). Group anxiety was monitored and positive emotions were cultivated (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). Collective empathy was fostered more than collective guilt and despair. Personal exploration and experiential learning were balanced with factual information and structured activities. When participants received factual information any disequilibrium was matched by support whenever possible. Students were invited to reflect on their thoughts and experience rather than "preaching the truth" (Pedersen, Aly, Hartley & McGarty, 2008, p. 6). There was time to socialize and share food. The speakers included a student, an academic, student support and residence staff and a member of the community, also a diverse group. This group, together with the students, became a learning community on the day.

The workshop was held in a communal area belonging to the residences. The program for the workshop consisted of seven short seminars. Firstly, the Residence Manager welcomed the group and introduced the university and residential context and then the concept of diversity. In session two, participants considered their own diversity (self awareness) and discussed values, prejudice, privilege and stereotyping. During session three, Michelle Muchatuta, a barrister from the community, presented information about the Australian legal framework. Participants received a CD Rom "Good practice, good business Eliminating discrimination and harassment from your workplace" developed by the Australian Human Right Commission. Session four was devoted to cultural diversity. The group shared their experiences of different cultures and reflected on culture shock, cultural values and effective communication strategies. Students received an audio CD and booklet "Voices of Australia" outlining the history of the Racial Discrimination Act. The gender diversity session covered gender privilege, roles and stereotypes and sexist language. Gender equity at university and in the workplace was raised along with practical strategies for change. Dr Rebecca Beirne, Lecturer in Film, Media and Cultural Studies presented the sixth session about sexual diversity. Jonathon Moylan, Welfare Officer from the Newcastle University Students Association introduced the final session on economic diversity. Beliefs about equity and widening participation were explored in the context of the Australian Equity Policy Framework for Higher Education. Students discussed the impact of economic factors on access, retention and academic success at university.

Sessions were lively and interactive. A range of methods structured students' learning experiences. There was a mix of personal, pairs and group exercises. Participants played games, engaged in role plays, watched film clips and were invited to make pictorial representations of their experience. They were provided with information folders that included materials for each topic and media resources. The group was surrounded by displays consistent with the diversity themes, for example posters depicting women in engineering. Props such as a road barrier and a clothesline of diversity paper dolls added impact.

The group completed some pre and post measures, program evaluations and a follow up query about observed change. In the pre training survey, participants reported a greater sense of belonging to the residences than to the general campus. Eighty-nine percent agreed that they spent time with peers from different backgrounds and 79% indicated willingness to act for the rights of others. Sixty-eight percent believed they were aware of their own prejudices. Students also rated their attitude to people different from themselves, with response options ranging from extremely unfavourable (0%) to extremely favourable (100%). Three students self rated 50%, with the remainder nominating their attitudes between 80-90% favourable.

Workshop evaluations were generally positive. All participants felt able to participate and enjoyed the workshop, 89% found the program interesting and said they would recommend it to their peers. Ninety-four percent learnt more about diversity, 84% thought reflecting about diversity would help them with their studies and 100% said they would use the knowledge and skills they learnt. Students rated the sessions about cultural and sexual diversity as the most useful (100% agreement). The economic diversity session was considered the least useful. This was the last session of the day. Several students volunteered to act as peer mentors for future workshops.

Three weeks after the program participants received a post diversity workshop survey. The survey invited them to write half a page outlining "if the workshop contributed to changing any of your thoughts, feelings or behaviours." Students responded with reflections such as "I had never really stopped to think about all of this for so much time. The more I heard and talked to other people, the more I realised that I really didn't know much." "I have tried to stop myself saying gay when something is stupid or crap. I didn't think about it before but it must be hard for people to hear that all the time, kind of gay equals bad." Participants were also invited to share any ideas about how to create a welcoming campus community for students in 2009. Their suggestions included "have some basic signs around campus and on the web in other languages" and "cover places with posters about all types of different groups and good messages." Anecdotal feedback from a colleague offering training in the residences four months after the program suggests that students who attended the diversity workshop were able to apply their learning in other contexts.

The project has contributed to the cultivation of a positive climate for diversity and peer connection at Edwards Hall student residence. Diversity discourse with students and insights gained from their feedback have created opportunities to involve them in future dialogues and planning. A local resource package was developed for the university community, with future applications to be explored. Some academics, administrative staff and student groups have expressed interest in the program. Potential exists for future collaborations. The Academic Registrar has requested the program be adapted as a training tool for her frontline administrative staff, with an emphasis on service delivery to our students. According to Kulik and Roberson (2008, as cited in Kulik & Roberson, 2008) "the very existence of diversity workshops or subjects conveys a strong signal that the…institution values diversity." (p. 313). The project encountered some limitations in regard to the technical side of filming the workshop and measuring the extent of change. It would be worthwhile to conduct a study with a larger cohort to quantify the later and to compare models of diversity education. As Paluck (2006) states "The diversity training field demonstrates that it is ripe for collaborative action research."

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