Communication challenges in a multicultural learning environment

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Abstract

Culture is an intricate concept, with many different classifications. Simply put, "culture" refers to a group or community with which we share common experiences that shape the way we understand the world. Each of us is shaped by many factors, and culture is one of the powerful forces that influence our lives.

This paper offers a critique of problems experienced in multicultural learning environments and explores factors that inhibit intercultural communication. In addition, this paper highlights current psychological and cultural issues which are relevant to contemporary life in South Africa.

Keywords: culture, communication, learning, multiculturalism.

Introduction

In pursuance of apartheid, the South African education system was characterised by fifteen different ethnically divided administrative Departments of Education, which included Education departments for the homelands: Ciskei, QwaQwa, Lebowa, Venda, KwaZulu, KwaNdebele, Gazankulu, Transkei and Bophuthatswana (Singh 2004: 2). Funding, resources, and opportunities in education were segregated with "white education being the most privileged. The Indians, Coloureds and then the Africans on a sliding scale were allocated money and resources for education" (Singh 2004: 2). Higher education was the privilege of the whites with separate universities for Indians and Coloureds and three institutions being designated for Africans, which were: University of Fort Hare, University of the North and University of Zululand (Nkomo 1984). Post 1994, saw institutions of higher learning rapidly becoming melting pots of diverse cultures and languages as universities continue to attract a rich mix of racially and culturally diverse students (du Plessis and Bisschoff 2007: 245). This means that classrooms are now multicultural and multilingual as they are made up of learners and their educators with their different languages and dialects each with their own educational, social, historical and economic backgrounds adding to the diversity in the classroom. Learners and educators therefore find themselves in classrooms that are very diverse in terms of culture, language, race and background. This diversity brings with it many challenges. As Pettigrew and Tropp (2000) cautioned, simply bringing different racial and cultural groups into contact may generate more heat than light. A survey conducted among undergraduate learners at the Durban University of Technology (DUT), a tertiary institution in South Africa found that learners were unhappy with "*the manner in which the institution deals with the whole issue of diversity*". They expressed concern that there are "*no programs in place to help us to get along with each other*". This survey was prompted by the authors' experience with their learners who were very reluctant to work with each other and in many instances even refused to associate with or talk to each other. Learners felt that they did not "*know enough about each other*" or that there "*was no need to talk*" to people from different cultural or racial groups as "*we have our own friends*".

The purpose of this paper then is to offer a critique of problems experienced in a multicultural learning environment and explores the factors that inhibit intercultural communication. This paper hopes to build on literature in its exploration of the ways in which learners, educators and institutions of learning conceptualise and construct their experiences in relation to diversity issues. As Holloway *et al.* (1999: 175) said, it is essential to encourage tolerance and dialogue in a multi-cultural context like South Africa where there is often tension between preserving the cultural identities of different groups (whether they are based on religion, race or language) and promoting national unity.

Culture

Cultures are based on social and linguistic communities. Fielding (1993: 50) defines culture as a system of beliefs, assumptions and values shared by a group of people. Anthropologists Kevin Avruch and Peter Black (1993) explain that one's own culture provides the "lens" through which we view the world, the "logic" by which we order it and the "grammar" by which it makes sense. In other words, culture is central to what we see, how we make sense of what we see, and how we express ourselves (*see also* Marshall, 2002, p. 8 and Meier, 2007, p. 658).

In South Africa, we exist amongst diverse groups which are culturally distinctive and which allows us to communicate in different ways. This makes us multicultural. du Toit (2004) explains that multiculturalism is more than the expression of cultural variety, it also concerns communication. He adds that for multiculturalism to 'succeed' and in order to stimulate peaceful coexistence, meaningful communication is a requisite. Meier (2007, p. 660) agrees that people communicate within and between cultures by means of language, which is therefore central to their social relationships. Campbell (2004, p. 62) concurs that cultural differences tend to be revealed in language, and misunderstandings between people from different cultures tend to arise from their use of language to communicate with each other.

Multicultural education seeks to achieve greater social harmony in a society and world currently beset by intercultural conflict. Based on an ideal of cultural pluralism, this does not mean that people must reject their ethnic identities but strike a compromise between cultural assimilation and cultural separatism or segregation. Being multicultural can lead to an increased perception of the equal human worth of all people and its acceptance as the norm of human experience (Samovar and Porter 1995).

In multicultural countries such as South Africa and the United States, it is imperative that the education system encourages learners to become interculturally competent. The process of becoming intercultural is a "personal transformation from cultural to intercultural … of growth beyond one's original cultural conditioning. This does not mean that a highly intercultural person's identity is culture-free or cultureless. Rather, it is not rigidly bound by membership to any one particular culture" (Lindsay and Dempsey 1983: 267). Furthermore, for learners to become interculturally competent, it is essential that all participants in the education system – administrators, learners and educators become aware of their own cultural background and how their own beliefs and values influence their interactions with learners of other cultural backgrounds (Lustig and Koester 2006, *see also* Bennett and Bennett 2004).

Intercultural studies have gained popularity in South Africa. As Ya-Wen Teng (2005) said, intercultural communication is not only a need, but a requirement for success in today's pluralistic society. An extensive review, by scholars like Chick (1985), de Kadt (1992), Kruger (1990) and Parry (1993, 2000) in Dlomo (2003), elucidate that such popularity can be attributed to the need for reconciliation and peaceful coexistence of different racial and cultural groups, and an increasing recognition of the importance for multiculturalism and multilingualism in South Africa. The post-apartheid era in South Africa calls for all racial groups to live in harmony and work together to build a country that is economically, politically and socially stable. Developing intercultural competence includes self-reflection, gathering information about your own and other cultures, appreciating cultural similarities and differences, using cultural resources, and acknowledging the essential equality and value of all cultures (Klein and Chen 2001: 38-39). It is demonstrated, among other things, by the ability or sensitivity to interpret cultural styles of communication which include language, signs, gestures, body language and customs (Bennet 2003: 32-33).

Fielding (1996) reports on fundamental patterns of cultural differences, and infers that the following are barriers to effective intercultural communication amongst learners at tertiary level: defensiveness, different world views, different values and beliefs, prejudices, different languages, different ways of using and interpreting the non-verbal code, different ways of constructing messages, unequal power, and the failure to allow for individual cultural differences within a group. These descriptions point out some of the recurring causes of inter-cultural communication difficulties in a multicultural learning environment. As learners enter into multicultural dialogue or collaboration, they are often faced with

these generalized differences. Learners need to identify these problems and realize how their culture may be shaping their own reactions. It is important for them to see the world from others' points of view.

Methodology

The objective of this study was to determine the problems experienced by learners in a multicultural learning environment. The questionnaire administered focused on achieving this objective and included questions on: problems experienced in the education of culturally diverse learners, the accommodation of different cultural orientations, issues of language diversity and non-verbal behavior. Two hundred questionnaires were administered to first, second and third year Public Relations, Marketing and Sports Management learners at the Durban University of Technology. As some participants did not follow the instructions or did not complete the questionnaire adequately, only the data from one hundred and sixty two participants were analysed.

The Durban University of Technology is a higher education institution with a myriad of cultures and many race groups. At the time of writing, there were 15 812 African, 3 834 Indian, 1 140 White, 329 Coloured and 47 learners of Eastern origin (Chinese and Japanese). The Indian and African race groups are further sub-divided into various ethnic groups, eg. amongst the African culture, the Zulus and Xhosas are the two dominant groups that exist in the Kwazulu Natal area, but learners from other African cultures also attend the DUT. The Indian culture is sub-divided into four categories, namely, Tamil speaking, Telegu speaking, Hindi speaking and Gujarati speaking individuals (Pratap Kumar 2000).

Findings

The first question focused on communication problems that existed across the different cultures among the learners. They responded as follows:

1. Prejudice	23 %
2. Different languages	44 %
3. Racism	30 %
4. Different ways of constructing messages	41 %
5. Defensiveness	24 %
6. Different values and beliefs	55 %
7. Unequal Power	33 %
8. Failure to allow for individual differences within a culture	25 %
9. Lack of Trust	45 %
10. Cultural stereotyping	42 %
11. Ethnocentrism	33 %

55 % believed that different values and beliefs were a major cause of the communication problems that existed. Samovar and Porter (1995: 83), pronounce that one of the most important functions of belief systems is that they are the basis of our values. The links between perception, culture and world view are made clear in Hoebel and Frost's (in Samovar and Porter 1995: 114) definition of world view as "the human being's inside view of the way things are coloured, shaped, and arranged according to personal cultural preconceptions." World view thus influences all aspects of our perception and consequently affects our belief and value systems as well as how we think. It would seem that among the learners

surveyed, the Indian and African learners still maintain their separateness in terms of the apartheid legacy in South Africa. While learners are not openly racist toward each other, they keep to their own race group during social and other interactions. Closer examination of the interactions revealed that learners were in fact mostly associating with members of their own cultural groups. Some said that this was because they understood each other as they spoke the same language, while others said that they just believe in the same things or see things in a particular way. Then there were those that frowned upon people who were different from them. They criticized their manner of worship, the food they ate, their dress or the way they spoke. Sen Gupta (2003: 162) points out that people are naturally steeped in their own culture and are therefore ethnocentric which means that they believe that "our way is the best way and the only way". He (2003: 160) goes on to say that in an intercultural encounter, people would be challenged by the sudden difference in culture, which shifts their focus from their familiar sphere to aspects of themselves with which they are unfamiliar and this may force an evaluation or re-evaluation of their beliefs and values.

45 % of the learners believed that there was lack of trust amongst their peers. According to Samovar *et al* (2007: 316) "the single most important trait associated with people of character is their trustworthiness. Characteristics often associated with the trustworthy person are integrity, honor, altruism, sincerity, and goodwill". It is evident that trust between communicators is very important. The general lack of trust that exists between two complete strangers leads to an uncomfortable situation marred by doubt and suspicion. Educators of the sample group of learners confirmed that this is evident in terms of group work and assessments. They said that when learners are asked to work in groups or to engage in group tasks, they are reluctant to do so. They added that one of the many issues that contributes to such negative opinions, was the language barrier. This was confirmed by the 44 % of the respondents who blamed the different languages as a major source to problems experienced. Language is the medium through which a culture expresses its world view. As Pennington (1985) said, like culture, language is learned and it serves to convey thoughts, transmit values, beliefs, perceptions and norms (*see also* Campbell (2004). Kaschula and Anthonissen (1995) found that in all communities, language varies. Language varieties include different: accents, linguistic styles, pronunciations, register, lexicon and even different grammatical rules which may contrast with each other for social reasons (Holmes cited in Dlomo 2003: 21).

According to Dlomo (2003: 20) "language varieties can cause communication problems when people who use these varieties have to interact. These problems can be further complicated by the fact that these varieties are linked to culture". Language influences thought and thought influences language, and each is influenced by culture. One may find that people from different cultures may speak the language on different levels of fluency. These varieties also influence the one's perception of the messages one receives from others. Students in a multicultural environment speak somewhat differently from each other. All of these differences relate to their different language styles and different behaviors which are related to their different cultural backgrounds, beliefs and other factors. Seiler and Beall (2008: 100) mention that communicators should also be aware that there are cultures that have greater or lesser expectations for an individual's involvement in communication events.

According to Kaschula and Anthonissen (cited in Dlomo 2003: 6) "speakers from different cultures have varying degrees of linguistic and communicative competence in English. These levels of communicative and linguistic competence have a major impact on the fluency of the speakers in the spoken language". The issue of language distinction is complicated, but at the same time reflective of the variation within South African languages and culture. Learners in most cases stereotype other groups because of the way they speak English. Mersham (1987: 26) suggests that we should promote South African English which encompasses all the varieties spoken by different groups. He continues to articulate that there is no need to enforce the linguistic purist view because a spoken language should be reflective of people's way of life. In South Africa it is difficult to maintain pure English as there are a number of languages spoken by people of various cultures. Mersham (1987) further suggests that if the way of life dictates a specific way of using language, then people should adhere to this to enable them to communicate effectively.

This study found that misunderstanding between African and Indian learners often occur because of communication problems where learners cannot understand each other. This misunderstanding often

requires speakers to repeat themselves and this causes frustration. The majority of the African learners suggested that in order to overcome this problem of communication, that Indian learners should learn either isiZulu or isiXhosa to facilitate easy discussion. The Indian learners in turn felt that English is a common language of communication across all cultures on campus and would alleviate most of the problems currently experienced. Another common problem occurred when African learners in a mixed group periodically reverted to their native language during conversation. This at most times was unintentional and unconscious, but was viewed negatively by the Indian learner.

Although different race groups and thus a variety of cultures participated in this study communication problems were mostly present amongst the African and Indian learners presumably because of their numbers. These learners tended to stick together and worked together however, they were constantly mindful of the other cultures within their own race groups which caused them to relate differently and attach stereotypes to one another.

Non-verbal communication or body language was also regarded as a major contributor to a communication breakdown. According to Albert (1996: 331) non-verbal behavior leads to miscommunication because most people are unaware that non-verbal patterns are determined by culture, and that people from different cultures have different interpretations of these behaviors in a given situation. Nonverbal communicative behavior, such as concept of time or the use of space, differs widely from culture to culture. For example, proxemics, the study of "the way in which people use personal space and distance around them to mark territory between them and those they are communicating with (Martin and Nakayama 2000: 184), recognizes that "people of different cultures do have different ways in which they relate to one another spatially." Furthermore, the use of space helps define social relationships. For example, the Indian learners often sat with an empty chair between them, whereas the African learners often sat close to each other in the classroom even though there were plenty of seats available. The African learners felt that the Indian learners were being racist, while the Indian learners could not understand the need to sit close to each other as there was plenty of room available. Hall (1959, 1976) contends that most people hold unconscious assumptions about what is appropriate in terms of space, time, interpersonal relations and ways of seeking truth. These assumptions he says, may cause intractable difficulties in intercultural encounters. Misinterpretation of non-verbal behavior often leads to the development of stereotypes and negative attitudes. Educators admitted that because they did not understand the body language of their learners in relation to their different cultures, this often led to problems between themselves and their learners. Educators learned that when Africans communicate with elders, they should not maintain eye contact and that their gaze should ideally be at a lower level than the elder. De Kadt (1992: 146) maintains that respect and reverence always follow the upward movement and certain body movements accompany it. Therefore when African learners entered their offices, they immediately sat down so that their gaze was not at eye level with their superior, whereas when an Indian learner entered the office, they remained standing, and only sat if they were offered a seat. The Indian learner would maintain eye contact with the educator to show that they were confident and that they were honest.

Although 62 % agreed that they work in multicultural groups, other learners were aware that cultural tolerance is not practised at DUT and that some learners are ethnocentric. They said that they prefer to work on their own, but if they had to work in groups, they preferred to work in their own cultural groups. The following diagram describes a typical classroom situation at DUT. Particularly at second and third year levels, learners tend to cluster into their respective race groups. However the diagram further clarifies that there is a distinction with learners from the African culture, as the isiXhosa and isiZulu speaking individuals distance themselves from each other and cluster on their own.

As a way forward, learners said that they were keen to learn about other cultures and suggested that there should be open dialogue in their classrooms to enable them to share information about their cultural beliefs and values. They also recommended that the university do more to assist in terms of socializing learners within the multicultural environment. They indicated that they are interested in learning and understanding each others cultures but suggested it should be done through team building exercises and communal events where there was no pressure in the form of tests or examinations. Learners also emphasized that cultural tolerance should be encouraged but not taught as a subject. They added that language classes should be offered to learners so that they could learn to speak different languages. This would also help them to understand their peers and to engage in dialogue with each other. The majority of the learners said that a non-academic programme would help them to adjust to the culturally diverse societies which they find themselves in.

Conclusion

Although this study was concerned with cultural diversity and the respect thereof, learners continued to talk in terms of race. They did not seem to be able to talk in terms of culture only and had to be constantly reminded of the differences in these two concepts or classifications. Given South Africa's legacy of apartheid, it would seem that learners' reactions were borne out of the historical race classification system and separate living. The way has to be paved for learners to start associating and communicating with each other. They have to overcome their prejudices. Ethnocentrism and racism issues have to be addressed at the institution in order for open dialogue to commence. Learners need to stop regarding each other with suspicion. Learners need to acknowledge that they are indeed different but they must also recognize that they need to learn to communicate with, tolerate and work with each other. Bennet (2003: 48-51) adds that this recognition process takes place in six stages: denial, defense, minimizing, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. Seeing that learners were displaying characteristics of the first three stages, this study proposes that the DUT and indeed all education institutions make a concerted effort to help learners to achieve the last three stages. Programs will have to be put in place to enable learners to learn to interact with each other. Learners have to become familiar with customs, traditions, values, and norms of the different cultural groups on campus. Cultivating a respect for cultural diversity will hopefully lead to tolerance among learners of different cultures among their own race groups. By learning about the different cultural practices, beliefs and ways of life, learners will be exposed to new and different world views. This awareness will hopefully in turn, broaden and inform their perceptions of diversity leading to greater acceptance and tolerance of diversity in terms of race. Multiculturalism needs to be celebrated. These goals cannot be attained overnight, but sustained, carefully planned intervention on the part of the institution can reap numerous rewards not only for the learners, but for the educators and indeed all players in a multicultural environment.

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