Face to Face Encounters

Education and Engagement for a Shared Humanity

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Abstract

Despite the prevalence of conflict and violence in the world, education offers hope for social transformation and a recognition of our shared humanity. Much of the hatred and violence has its origins in a fear of 'the other', while education has the potential to equip people with the knowledge and skills to overcome such fear, build social harmony, challenge injustice, and build bridges across cultural and religious barriers. Based on the recognition of our shared humanity and the practice of respectful dialogue, it allows students to explore together what really matters to them as human beings and as members of their society and communities. Case studies of such encounters in Australian educational contexts will be presented in this paper, analyzing their impact and discerning principles they offer for structuring education for a shared humanity.

Introduction

"It was the best of times; it was the worst of times ….."

These paradoxical opening lines from Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* might well be used to describe the world at the beginning of the 21:st Century. The 'best of times' seem present when profoundly significant events occur which appear to draw human beings together, foster social harmony in the midst of diversity, and challenge entrenched structures, processes and attitudes which have dehumanized or oppressed segments of humanity. Such events include the inauguration of the first Afro-American president of the USA in January 2009, and the apologies by the Australian government to Aboriginal people in February 2008 and to children who grew up in institutions, orphanages and foster care, in November 2009. However, the 'worst of times' are evident in the persistence of conflict and violence (in Iraq, Afghanistan, Gaza, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, to name just a few) and the widespread violation of human rights in places such as Libya, Zimbabwe, Tibet and Burma.

Written from the perspective of three academics from a university in Australia, which is a very culturally diverse nation, this paper begins with a general discussion of world events as a way of understanding the role of engagement as a response to conflict arising out of religious and cultural differences.It then reports on research relating to engagement in educational and multi-faith settings.

World Context

The international stage is dominated by conflicts in which religious ignorance or intolerance can be significant factors, but at the same time there are instances where genuine engagement has led to more peaceful co-existence.

Northern Ireland presents a unique example of reaching understanding and concluding a peace deal after decades of violent religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants. Although the road to peace was

bumpy and faced numerous hurdles, the dialogue and engagement of very different parties prepared the ground for the Good Friday agreement and a commitment to peace was established. (Fitzduff, 2002) Still to yield the same kind of stability is the engagement between the Palestinians and Israelis who have been locked in one of the most intractable religious and cultural conflicts of the twentieth century. Similarly longstanding are the simmering conflicts between Muslims and Christians in Egypt and the former Yugoslavia.

In 1948, when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed by the General Assembly of the UN, nations looked beyond conflict to a world peace based upon the inherent dignity of all people. "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." (United Nations 1948: article 1)

This gained expression when the present UN Secretary General BanKi-moon speaking at the Second Alliance of Civilisations Forum in Istanbul quoted an unnamed thinker who said

"The world changes, but tensions and stereotypes from the past remain. In order to shake up these preconceived notions, nothing works better than individuals meeting face to face." (Ki Moon 2009) This means dialogue.

President Barack Obama described this dialogue more fully as "engagement based on mutual respect and common interests and shared values" at the Summit of the Americas in April 2009. (Obama 2009)

These are the principles of 'education for a shared humanity', implemented when people from diverse backgrounds, cultures and religions meet face to face, and learn, engage and communicate together.

The Challenge of Educating in and for a Shared Humanity

Education in and for a shared humanity calls on the engagement of participants in interaction across traditional boundaries of race, culture and religion to a degree not always present in the local neighbourhood (Denson and Cheng, 2009). For formal learning to be effective within spaces which will facilitate engagement, attention needs to be nuanced with respect to both extent of diversity and people's sense of belonging (Benner & Crosnoe, 2011). The processes of educational engagement in culturally diverse educational spaces provide opportunities for the development of a new sense of identity and of agency with respect to people's roles within the wider community (Polman & Miller, 2010). Such engagement requires personal and collective crossing of cultural and organisational boundariesthrough dialogical learning, which includes identification and knowledge of the other, coordination of cooperative and routinized exchanges, reflection to expand one's perspectives and transformation of the engagement (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).Developing one's sense of identity and commitment to citizenship are important outcomes in this very diverse but interconnected global world. Interpersonal interactions with racially diverse peers haveincreased civic engagementof university students (Bowman, 2011). However, an important factor in these processes is that university students' sense of global citizenship is based within a moral commitment of improving the world.

Australian Context

The *National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* gives weight to a commitment to national and global citizenship and social literacy when it includes the following amongst its goals:

All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals,

and active and informed citizens. The goal of being active and informed citizens includes to:

- appreciate Australia's social, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity, and have an understanding of Australia's system of government, history and culture; and
- relate to and communicate across cultures, especially the cultures and countries of Asia (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2008:9)

Students' attainment of these goals requires them to develop social literacies and capacities which enable them to relate respectfully with other people.

A major social commentator in Australia, Hugh Mackay has observed "It's our sense of society that produces our moral sense: we act out of altruism, courage, heroism or compassion precisely because we feel part of a larger whole.But it's true, ..., that if we are to enrich this thing called society, we must examine how we are acting *towards each other*, rather than on a large stage called 'society'". (Mackay 2007:341)

Examining and reflecting upon how we act towards each other with our personal and collective identities requires reason and reflection. Amartya Sen highlights the essential role of reason and honest reflection if people are to develop a better understanding of their own and other people's cultures and identities.

> *"Identity is thus a quintessentially plural concept, with varying relevance of different identities in different contexts. And, most importantly, we have choice over what significance to attach to our different identities. There is no escape from reasoning just because the notion of identity has been involved. Choices over identities do involve constraints and connections, but the choices that exist and have to be made are real, not illusory." (Sen 2005:352)*

The next section of the paper examines the approaches and effectiveness of interfaith and intercultural educational programs which emphasized learning through "face to face" engagement, "reason and honest reflection".

Research methodology

The research involved an analysis of three case studies of engagement in the area of interfaith and intercultural understanding. The first was of a pilot interfaith-intercultural project in primary and secondary schools in Sydney funded by the Australian Government's Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The second and thirdpresent initiatives undertaken by Australian Catholic University's Institute for Advancing Community Engagement (IACE) in its *Beyond Differences* agenda, which addressed the issues of interfaith and intercultural understanding and engagement.

The research questions being addressed were:

- What sort of shared humanity did participants envisage?; and
- How was education effective in advancing toward this shared humanity?

The data sources consisted of qualitative data from interviews and surveys, observational data, and - for the first case study - website data analysis. The analysis of data with respect to the two research questions is presented separately for the case study report for the schools based interfaith and intercultural understanding initiative, and for the combined university based case studies.

Case Study 1

A Schools-based Interfaith and Intercultural Understanding Initiative (funded by the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations)

The Interfaith and Intercultural Understanding (IIU) project was a pilot program designed to contribute to the Australian Government's National Action Plan for social cohesion through a place-based approach to education in sixteen schools in two clusters centered around the Lakemba and Macquarie Fields communities in Sydney, Australia. The Australian Catholic University was commissioned to review this project.[1]

The schools in the project completed a situational analysis which provided an understanding of people and contexts and formed the basis for design and implementation of appropriate local programs for promoting interfaith and intercultural understanding.A key part of this project was the development of support materials which were shared within and between clusters.The funding for the project enabled students to take part in educational activities such as excursions which would have been out of the reach of students normally.Regular meetings allowed the development of supportive networks among schools in the clusters. Thus, what was put into place was a deeply contextualised intervention backed up by external consultancy, additional resources and networked support across schools.

Other than the project documentation, the major data sources were those people involved in delivering the project, participating as clients, engaging in related programs or observing as informed community members.

The responses of participants in the review shed light on the two focus questions for this paper.

What sort of shared humanity?

Perhaps the best insight into this question is captured by the response of one of the students who was interviewed.She had this to say:

> "Back home in Egypt, our families experienced persecution, so their experience of other religions is very different from ours.Here in Australia it is hard for us, because at a young age we have to work out, and form our own view. Our parents have harder views than us.I understand why, but we have to form a new view for ourselves, by ourselves, and give people acceptance."

The strong and consistent message of participants in the IIU was that social cohesion and mutual respect were preferable to the elements of ignorance, fear and suspicion that coloured so many of the interactions in their communities, and that further, education could be a powerful tool in bringing about the shift to this new, more accepting humanity.

Education as an effective tool

The educative intervention represented by IIU was explicitly intended to impact on students and their communities. The degree of impact on communities was limited by the comparative brevity of the project at the time of review.There were, however, acknowledged impacts on students in that time, as well as important influences on teachers and school practices – key mediating factors. One teacher described the impact on students in these terms:

> "This project, for the participating students, has provided them with soul enriching experiences – a concentration of human value enriched activities has left a lasting impression.... on these students."

Participation in IIU was seen as breaking down barriers. There were early signs that the approaches used by IIU schools had impacted positively on students' sense of self, and on their interfaith and intercultural understanding.

Students, teachers and principals of non-public schools spoke of a decreased sense of isolation which came from meeting other students. This was particularly, but not exclusively, the case for Islamic schools. They felt less subject to stereotyping – observing a change in the attitudes of non-Muslim students with whom they interacted in the safe environment of inter-school functions. Comments like this one from a student were common:

> *"It's good to discover that they don't look at us as different – like we're terrorists or something."*

A key learning about the kinds of intervention that were likely to be successful was that IIU projects worked well when embedded in the curriculum, and in turn shaped the curriculum.They had to be a part of the regular fabric of school life and clearly aligned with the explicit purposes of the school.

Principals and executives who formally endorsed IIU or who were involved publicly in its carriage expressed a moral purpose and vision for the school and the community which gave priority to the dignity of all people and the integral role of social cohesion and inclusion in Australia.

Teacher learning which grew out of their experience of their project was a positive influence upon their understanding of, and commitment to the importance of faith and culture in learning. Opportunities to share their experiences across schools were valued by teachers.

One of the most valued elements of the IIU by teachers and students alike was the opportunity for engagement in "safe" contexts beyond schools' own walls with people of different faith and cultural backgrounds. Schools varied in how they pursued such engagement.

Essential to this engagement in safe places were reflection, trust and relationships. In safe spaces, stories were shared - especially people's experiences as refugees. That this sharing of stories was appreciated by students, teachers and parents was apparent in the majority of responses to the evaluation surveys and interviews. It gave them the opportunity to reflect upon and understand each other's "journey". People were deeply affected by the stories and these gave them a "real sense of why students behaved as they did". This sharing and mutual understanding was seen as contributing in one school to "sincerity, politeness and genuine good nature". Students also mentioned that they learnt that "everyone's different and we should respect that" and "when you study religions you realise that faith can be important for people".

This first case has highlighted the importance of face to face contact between individuals from different cultures, combined with the opportunity for reflection on the experience. In a school setting, the whole agenda of interculturalism was strengthened by being embedded in the wider curriculum and by the endorsement of the principal as leader. These combined to create an environment in which students felt safe in interactions with peers and teachers which were marked by a quest for mutual understanding rather than difference.

Case Study 2

Meeting World Religions Face-to-Face – A University Interfaith and Intercultural Course Unit

The second case study is one drawn from a university context. Australian Catholic University expresses its commitment to Community Engagement through a strategic "beyond differences" focus, which includes agendas to move beyond disadvantage, beyond borders and beyond differences.

The case presented here is part of the beyond differences agenda, and highlights community engagement embedded into the teaching and learning process.

In 2008, Australian Catholic University's School of Theology offered a unit titled *World Religions* which was intended to give students a broad introduction to the beliefs, practices and ethics of five world religions, including Australian Indigenous spirituality.

The lecturer-in-charge and a member of the University's Institute for Advancing Community Engagement (IACE) developed an approach to enhance the learning of the students by personal engagement. As in past years, the lectures given by visiting representatives of the faith traditions occurred, and visits to the synagogue and mosque were scheduled. The major innovations emerged as a result of the *Meeting World Religions Face-to-face* initiative. The first occurred in week 2 of the semester (second meeting of the unit) when a representative of each of the faith traditions joined a panel and spoke to the class about "what it means for me to be a Muslim (or Jew or ..)" and "what it's like for me to be a Muslim (or Jew or ..) in Sydney in 2008".

After each presenter spoke for about ten minutes, the students were asked to remain quiet, reflect on what they had heard and then to write down some responses they had to it. When all the visiting lecturers had spoken, the students were invited to ask questions or make observations after having reflectively considered what had been presented.

The second innovation came in week 11, when the whole three hour block was given over to a *Meeting World Religions Face-to-face* Forum. For the Forum, each faith tradition's representative was asked to bring along a young adult member of their community also. While not all the traditions were able to manage this, those who did found an even greater level of engagement with the students, who felt very comfortable interacting with someone closer to their own age, who 'spoke their language'.

Each faith group was seated at a separate table, and students moved in small groups to each table. When each group had visited each faith tradition, the class re-gathered as a whole and everyone was invited to reflect quietly on what they had experienced and what they had learnt in the Forum and only after the reflection was there discussion

What sort of shared humanity?

The evaluations made it clear that for many of the students this was the first time they had encountered and engaged face-to-face with a Hindu (or Muslim or …) and as a result they were hoping to develop a more positive approach when they confronted difference, or fear or mistrust of 'strangers'. One student commented

> *"I found the engagement with representatives of the World Religions informative and eye-opening. They both clarified aspects of their faith … and … helped debunk any myths or misconceptions about their religion which had not been explained or are distorted in society."*

Another wrote

> *"The realization of religious diversity allowed me to understand in a better way the need for religious tolerance and how lucky we are in a country like Australia to have this opportunity to meet and exchange ideas."*

Education as an effective tool

Comments suggested that students felt they understood some aspects of a faith tradition better because the explanation offered by the practitioner was much more comprehensible than information they had read.

> *"Actually meeting the faith representatives and seeking answers on a personal level, not from a textbook or the internet. It was interesting to hear their viewpoints, and the fact that they were willing to answer and engage on our own level was great."*

The *Meeting World Religions Face-to-face* initiative was primarily directed at enhancing the learning outcomes of students and increasing their engagement in the learning process. While knowledge and understanding were central to it, so also were reflection and mutually respectful dialogue. The engagement which occurred gave students insight into the values of other faith traditions and hopefully triggered some consideration of their own values, and where there are commonalities in the value systems of the various faith traditions. The course evaluations and conversations with the lecturer showed these students becoming more socially literate, that is, knowledgeable, competent and attitudinally attuned to become agents of positive change in their present communities and in their future professional roles.

Once again, as in the first case, participants here valued the opportunity for face to face interaction with people of other cultures. These encounters were also embedded in a consciously structured educational experience which went beyond transmission of facts to provide the opportunity for reflective engagement.

Case Study 3

Young Muslim Leadership Program – A University and Community Initiative

In 2007, 2008, and 2009 ACU's Institute for Advancing Community Engagement (IACE) collaborated with La Trobe University's Centre for Dialogue in a Young Muslim Leadership Program. Each year there were about 20 participants, who were young adult Muslims, some university students and some in employment, who had or aspired to leadership roles in the Islamic community. The majority came from Melbourne, but more recently small numbers of participants have come from south-east Asia. Prior to coming to Sydney, all had attended a series of lectures and discussions organized by the Centre for Dialogue.

IACE planned and facilitated a 4-day program in Sydney, with a focus on faith-based leadership. The program was designed to help the participants explore the tensions often expressed about being "authentically Muslim and authentically Australian", and to seek their own synthesis as they developed their skills and vision for leadership.It provided the participants with opportunities to engage with accomplished leaders from both within and beyond the Islamic community, including religious leaders such as an Imam and a Catholic bishop; a female representative of the New South Wales Islamic Council; people working in the media; and young people, Muslim and non-Muslim, who had assumed leadership roles in their respective communities.

Sessions were designed so that on most occasions some quality input was provided by high profile leaders from both the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Input was always followed by questions, and when time permitted, informal conversations in pairs or trios. A pattern of process was used: attentive listening in order to know and understand; reflection and connecting with my own experience; engaging face-to-face with others and seeking both common and divergent understandings in a mutually respectful dialogue.

A key component of the Young Muslim Leaders program each time it has run has been an engagement with the Indigenous community, through a visit to the Reconciliation Church at La Perouse. There the participants are welcomed by a lady who is both an Aboriginal elder and a leader of Aboriginal Catholic Ministry, Sydney. Here the participants are introduced to aspects of Aboriginal history and spirituality, and have the opportunity to ask wide-ranging questions.

Another characteristic of the YML program is the homestay component. All the young leaders were accommodated in non-Muslim homes – either private residences or convents or houses of Catholic Brothers - for the duration of their stay. For many of them it was the first time they had ever stayed over in a non-Muslim home, and initially some of them were quite concerned. Here was a need for safe spaces, and much effort was invested in allaying fears and assuring the young people that they were both safe and welcome there.

What sort of shared humanity?

The participants' evaluations of the Young Muslim Leadership Program attest to its impact at the time and its capacity to carry them forward, for example,

> *"I want to take my experience, emotions and expanded knowledge and share it with others who couldn't be a part of this program. I'm inspired to continue the work … of interfaith dialogue and social justice".*

The evaluations also rated the homestay component as a highlight of the program.Many of the guests spoke of how this experience had changed their views and understandings of non-Muslims. Importantly, the comments of most of the homestay hosts indicate that they were similarly enriched by their interactions with their visitors. For example, many people have never befriended a Muslim before, and many Muslims have never been in intimate friendships with Christians. This initiative opens a small window of opportunity to experience 'living with the other', and gain insight and understanding.

Here we see transformation occurring in the safe spaces created by hospitality in people's homes.

Education as an effective tool

Hospitality was a central experience and an essential learning in the Young Muslim Leadership Program. From the moment of their arrival, the young leaders were welcomed warmly and they offered a similar welcome towards each other, in recognition of their shared humanity, and the dignity of each person. Hospitality was modeled by the facilitators in the welcome accorded to visiting presenters, and the respectful way in which discussions, feedback and question and answer sessions were conducted.

The participants experienced hospitality which was conducive to transformative engagement when they were welcomed into other safe spaces, such as the Reconciliation Church, home to the Sydney Aboriginal Catholic Ministry at La Perouse, and the Gallipoli Mosque at Auburn. Transformative engagement was also facilitated in the safe space and warm welcome of dinners hosted by the Soka Gakkai International (Buddhist) and Affinity Intercultural Foundation (Muslim).

Finally, central to the success of the Young Muslim Leadership program, was the homestay component, mentioned earlier. No doubt this experience will shape the attitudes and actions of these young people when they return to the communities where they will exercise leadership.

The homestay element of case 3 created the opportunity for that same face to face engagement that was a feature of the first two cases. Hospitality (not just safe, but welcoming, spaces) provided an environment in which the facts about other cultures were enhanced by reflection on personal experiences.

Discussion

Our three case studies, with different student cohorts in very different settings, demonstrate the fundamental importance of face to face encounters for building increased intercultural understandings. These encounters did not stand alone, however. They were embedded in consciously designed educational experiences whose efficacy was enhanced by the environment of care and safety which was created. The endorsement of intercultural understanding within the formal curriculum, either by the actions of leaders, or simply by being given a place in the learning agenda, played an important role in the eyes of participants.

A shared humanity

Participants in the initiatives described here were invited and challenged to reconceptualise the way they understood and approached social diversity. Despite Australia's multicultural character, stereotypes based on ignorance and fear can still shape people's approach to diversity and social cohesion. These initiatives

brought members of different religious and cultural groups together face-to-face, and structured a safe place where people could share their stories and state their beliefs and understandings. The young people participating began to encounter each other not as strangers but as real human beings - people with common concerns, common hopes, common dreams for themselves and their children.

In this way, the dignity of each person was affirmed, and the participants engaged with one another in mutual respect. This is not to say that differences disappeared or that the engagement proceeded smoothly at all times, but what can be claimed is that the circle of engagement was widened for most participants, and a more generous and inclusive sphere of interaction was embraced by those involved.

Education for a shared humanity?

All programs reviewed here are examples of formal learning directed towards promoting a shared humanity characterized by recognition of human dignity, mutual respect, inclusivity and the common good. They served to develop social literacies, which make it possible for individuals to participate effectively in a contemporary multicultural society. They encompass "knowledge, practices, strategies and skills" (Raue *et al* 2008:2) for interpersonal and intercommunal engagement in society.

At the beginning of the twenty first century, globalization and the global economic crisis have the potential to push individuals and communities to a new insularity, a renewed search for national identity and a willingness to pit the other (be it nations or individuals) against 'us' and 'our well-being'. Initiatives such as those described here offer a different view of reality and a more hopeful range of possibilities for social harmony and cohesion to young people who are the potential future leaders in our world.

That projects such as these actually occur sends a message about the importance that educators place upon the values, attitudes and practices upon which the programs are built. Such messages need to be seriously considered when administrators and financial officers make decisions about curriculum structure and program sustainability.

The emphasis on the person reminds participants that people are first and foremost human beings and that our shared humanity calls us to recognize and respect the human rights of all, regardless of ethnic, cultural or religious identity. Education in and for human rights is served by these understandings.

The emphasis on learning together – with and from each other – places the learning squarely in the context of community, where it is also important to work together towards social harmony and peace. Such learning needs to draw from the collected wisdom of communities, and then be applied within those same communities to bring about and sustain social transformation.

The common intercultural and interfaith outcomes of the projects reviewed here suggest that a number of elements might be key to educating for a shared humanity:

- An articulated moral purpose which affirms the need for and commitment to education for a shared humanity;
- Legitimation of initiatives through integration into the formal curriculum;
- Strong advocacy and engagement by leadership at the local level;
- Development of social literacies which will equip students with knowledge, skills and appreciations which will allow them to engage with diversity in ways which promote social cohesion and harmony;
- Structured teaching and learning initiatives, including the facilitation of safe spaces where people encounter each other as human beings, face-to-face;
- Dialogue based upon and nurturing shared humanity and mutual respect;
- Learning and engagement for transformation, so that renewed attitudes and understandings lead to action for social change; and
- Common action in pursuit of shared goals, at both local and system levels.

These elements offer a way forward in the work of interfaith and intercultural dialogue, in pursuit of human dignity and the common good and the ground on which diverse people and groups can learn with and from each other.

The importance of both articulating the vision of a shared humanity and implementing face-to-face education to advance this vision is clear in the words of Sir William Deane when he was Governor General of Australia.

> *"The challenge and the responsibility to ensure that religious and cultural diversity is a source of advantage, benefit and good rather than a cause of disharmony, conflict and evil lie close to the heart of the quest for happiness, fulfillment and survival of our kind.*
>
> *Clearly enough … the key to real success in relation to that challenge and responsibility lies in mutual and genuine understanding, tolerance and respect of and for different cultural and religious traditions, practices and beliefs".(Deane 1997:62)*

Conclusion

A new humanity can be created through the development of a citizenry whose understandings and attitudes go beyond previous ignorance, stereotypes and enmities to a new vision for the future. The school children, university students and young Muslim leaders in these case studies showed how face to face encounters between people from different cultures and religions are giving them experiences of "the best of times". Old enmities are challenged and people develop new understandings of themselves and the community and world of which they are members. The new understandings are built upon the complexity and plurality of personal and national identities.

Central to the development of the new citizenry and the new sense of identity is that the moral purpose of education be legitimated, supported and expressed in curriculum, institutional leadership, and face to face engagement in safe places in schools, universities and local communities. The new citizenry needs to be educated for both achieving national educational goals and supporting the implementation at local, national and international levels of the International Bill of Human Rights. In this way people together can "strive for a better life, well-being and peace." (Ki Moon 2009)

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[1] The Report for this review can be accessed at http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/_resources/Interfaith_and_Intercultural_Review_Report.pdf