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Sharing the wisdom: Applying cycles of experiential learning to engage in cultural humility

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Abstract

This paper reflects on how teachers and students from different cultures engaged in a mutual process of learning in a post-graduate counselling program. Drawing on the work of Knowles (1990) and Kolb (1984), principles and cycles of adult and experiential learning were intentionally and explicitly applied to engage in cultural humility. As a result, an educational experience ensued whereby students became teachers and teachers became students as they collectively engaged in processes that enriched the learning of all involved.

1 Introduction

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is recognised as one of the most dangerous countries in the world to live in (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Gender-based, domestic, and intimate partner violence is commonplace. HIV/AIDS, drug and alcohol abuse, gambling and child abuse are rife. Yet, despite the prevalence of such severe individual and social problems, PNG is limited in its current ability to provide quality counselling services. Because only a small percentage of counselling practitioners in PNG have received specialised training, the majority lack core knowledge, skills and competencies and do not use therapeutic approaches in their work (DFAT, 2017).

One of several steps taken to address this problem was the introduction of a 12-month Graduate Certificate in Counselling (the program), specifically designed for a cohort of 25 PNG counsellors. The program was delivered in Queensland, Australia, over four intensive months of lectures, workshops, skills practice and site visits. The program was not only designed to develop and improve counselling knowledge, skills and competencies, but addressed current and prevalent social issues and challenges in PNG by including the most appropriate and relevant counselling theories and practices for those issues.

The higher education teachers that led the program had extensive experience and expertise in the design and delivery of counselling programs and in the application of the principles of experiential learning and teaching. Indeed, their typical approach to designing learning activities was based on the principles of adult learning and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, which places the learner's personal experience as central to the learning process (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). The program for PNG, however, tested and extended their typical approach to design and delivery. Indeed, their expertise in counselling (content) and experiential methods (process) had not previously been applied in such an unusual teaching and learning cultural context.

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Most literature on cultural diversity in the learning and teaching space falls into one of two categories: (1) students coming from different and various social and cultural backgrounds and joining in a dominant-culture classroom; or (2) teachers who have taken either a temporary or permanent overseas assignment (e.g., Hofstede, 1986). The situation reflected on here, however, presents a third and less typical cultural context, specifically a cohort of same-culture students who, as a single class, undertook a 12-month post-graduate program in another country. This cultural context, despite intensive preparation by designers and teachers, took the process of experiential learning to new levels.

As a result, an educational experience ensued whereby students became teachers and teachers became students as they mutually and collectively engaged in an exciting cycle of experiential learning and cultural humility.

2 Experiential learning and cultural humility – in theory

In their seminal article, Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998) explored cultural humility in the context of physician-patient relationships. They described cultural humility as the continual process of self-evaluation and self-critique of one's own cultural assumptions and behaviour, together with a lifelong commitment to engaging with and learning about other cultures in an endeavour to develop mutually beneficial partnerships with individuals and communities. The authors either directly mentioned, or implied, the importance of factors such as communication (and in particular listening) to understand what aspects of a particular culture are important at any given time; remaining other-oriented; bringing into check power imbalances; and developing respectful working relationships. Thus, cultural humility is an ongoing *process* of learning about culture/s, not an *outcome* or end point of having learned or developed competence in a particular culture.

Moving the context to teacher-student relationships, and particularly in an adult learning environment, Tervalon and Murray-Garcia's (1998) description of engaging in cultural humility has considerable similarities to engaging in experiential learning. Indeed, some of Knowles (1990) assumptions, on which Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle is based, are that learners are motivated and self-directed, reflective and self-critical, and practice-oriented; that they believe in the equality between teacher and learner; and that they like to be respected. These assumptions fit well with Tervalon and Murray-Garcia's cultural humility process involving self-evaluation and self-critique, lifelong commitment, bringing into check of power imbalances, and mutually respectful relationships.

Taking the analogy further, it seems plausible that Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle provides an ideal framework for purposefully and intentionally engaging in cultural humility. Kolb's model involves learners engaging in a four-stage cycle – engaging in an experience, reflecting on the experience, learning from the experience, and then applying their new learning to a new experience. Put simply, it is a cycle of doing, reviewing, thinking, and planning (before doing again). Like cultural humility, it is an ongoing process, rather than an outcome, of learning. Consequently, “teachers” and “learners” became engaged in explicit experiential learning cycles to engage with cultural humility.

3 Experiential learning and cultural humility – in practice

As teachers who are committed to the values and practices of experiential learning (see Section 2), we engaged in our typical practice of designing and delivering our courses by placing the learner's experience as central to the learning process (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). In practice, this played out by drawing on and applying the knowledge and experience of the PNG students to the counselling theories and skills we were teaching. For example, in teaching questioning techniques we would reflect on a particular counselling scenario experienced by a student in PNG and draw out the questioning techniques they had used, learn more about the principles of effective questioning, plan for how to use those techniques in the future, and

role-play the techniques for a new experience. We consider this to be experiential learning at a basic level. Through this process, students learned more about questioning techniques (as part of the curriculum) and teachers learned more about the application of questioning techniques in PNG, thus developing a deeper understanding of cultural nuances associated with particular counselling skills.

A further, and possibly higher-level, principle of adult and experiential learning is to engage in problem-centred approaches (Knowles, 1990). This played out in practice during the “struggles” on the part of students and teachers to integrate theory and practice in the PNG context. For example, when teaching how to facilitate a counselling session (through phases of developing rapport, hearing the story, prioritising and planning, and closing) students pointed out that they did not have time to do that in their counselling; that they often had “10 minutes to advise the client.” We engaged in collaborative problem-solving, weighing the pros and cons of a well-structured counselling session and how that might be facilitated within the perceived and/or real confines of the PNG context. This was a deeper level of experiential learning through which students learned the importance of this concept for effective outcomes for their clients and teachers learned more about the individual and organisational challenges of counselling in PNG.

But the real experience in cultural humility was not about *what* we were learning and teaching, but *how* we were learning and teaching. On a daily basis, we reflected on and sought feedback from the students about the content and process of the program. Understanding the importance of and respect given to elders in the PNG culture, we engaged in dialogue with older students about their traditions and ways of learning and sharing wisdom. Understanding that cultural changes are taking place in PNG, we ensured that younger voices were heard and responded by adapting some of the pre-determined curricula to include topics that were identified as being currently and culturally relevant. We fostered a community of inquiry where questions asked by and of students and teachers, particularly in relation to culture, formed the basis of our learning. A deeper understanding of the PNG culture facilitated effective and respectful conversations, and vice versa (Chang, Simon, & Dong, 2012). And it was at this level of experientialism that we engaged in a deeper level of cultural humility.

4 Conclusions

This paper has presented an experience whereby the work of Knowles (1990) and Kolb (1984) were intentionally drawn on to engage in a process of learning and cultural humility. The key learning from this experience, for teachers and academic developers, is that curriculum design (content) and delivery (process) needs to be open to and flexible regarding the “experience in the room”, particularly to the cultural knowledge and expertise of learners. Further, it is through this flexibility in both content and process that cultural differences are honoured and deep mutual learning can occur.

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