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Published

2014

Journal Title

The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education

DOI

[10.5204/intjfyhe.v5i1.196](https://doi.org/10.5204/intjfyhe.v5i1.196)

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Teaching cultural diversity in first year human services and social work: The impetus for embedding a cultural safety framework. A Practice Report

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Abstract

This report outlines how the concept of cultural safety was introduced in a first year human services and social work course at an Australian university. The application of this concept as a central framework for contemporary practice illustrates how cultural safety can enrich cross-cultural teaching and practice from the first year of study. When a culturally safe approach is embraced, practitioners respect and acknowledge the uniqueness of each individual, their own cultural frame of reference, and recognise that it is the service user who deems the professional relationship as culturally safe. While individual and institutional constraints can prevent the integration of this concept in relevant curricula and limit the impact of cultural safety knowledge on first year students' learning experiences, it is argued that a culturally safe philosophy should be embedded more systematically at individual and institutional levels, and throughout the student lifecycle, as a promising approach for cross-cultural encounters.

Please cite this practice report as:

Lenette, C. (2014). Teaching cultural diversity in first year human services and social work: The impetus for embedding a cultural safety framework. A Practice Report. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 5(1). 117-123. doi: 10.5204/intjfyhe.v5i1.196

This practice report has been accepted for publication in Int J FYHE. Please see the Editorial Policies under the 'About' section of the Journal website for further information.

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Introduction

The abundance of perspectives on effective strategies to teach diversity, particularly cultural diversity (Kruske, Kildea, & Barclay, 2006; Lee & Greene, 2004), shows the centrality of this aspect of human services and social work practice. Teaching such content can be as challenging as it is a rich and rewarding experience. For example, de Anda (2007) aptly describes a teacher's mixture of anticipation and apprehension when designing diversity courses, as "something both daunting and exciting about teaching ... to significantly change the students' views of themselves, the world around them (particularly the interpersonal world), and their relation to it" (p. 144). This process can be slightly more difficult when engaging with commencing university students who may be exploring a range of topics from different perspectives for the first time. Human services and social work educators therefore increasingly pay attention to pedagogies and contemporary frameworks that ensure students have meaningful learning experiences while exploring cultural diversity, given its importance to prepare students for complex practice contexts.

This paper outlines the overarching pedagogy used in a first year human services and social work course offered at Griffith University in Australia. This course is heavily influenced by the concept of cultural safety (Ramsden, 1992), which has become integral to the curriculum. Since first year students need to engage with a framework that embraces individuals' uniqueness fully, this requires a different pedagogy to the traditional *checklist* approach (Bin-Sallik, 2003) whereby the onus for *competence* is placed solely on

practitioner training disregarding service user perspectives. Exploring cultural safety challenges and engages first year students not only in relation to their own sense of self-awareness (De & Richardson, 2008), but also in deconstructing existing perceptions of "culture" and "culturally sensitive" approaches (Skellett, 2012). The present discussion adds to the knowledge on teaching diversity effectively by describing the application of a relatively novel concept as part of first year curriculum, and exploring its potentially transformative impact. It is argued that cultural safety should inform more extensively the pedagogy of how diversity is understood. Hence, there is an impetus to make central a philosophy that is currently marginal.

Kawa Whakaruruhau: Cultural safety

The concept of cultural safety originated from Aotearoa/New Zealand in the 1980s, based on Māori nursing students' experiences of ongoing racism in transcultural nursing (Skellett, 2012). Since Māori patients and nurses were treated poorly because of cultural distinctions, a group of nurses led by Irihapeti Ramsden began to challenge dominant approaches where strong cultural ties and beliefs were disregarded in nursing practices (van den Berg, 2010). Instead, "an environment in which there is mutual respect, openness and willingness to listen, and there is shared understanding and acknowledgment of the unique identity of others" (Skellett, 2012, p. 382) was privileged. Cultural safety's key tenet is that "it is the service user who makes a judgment about whether the professional relationship feels culturally safe" (De & Richardson, 2008, p. 43), making

practitioners more aware of and accountable for their approach. This principle thus signifies a shift in paradigms of power enmeshed in service delivery with diverse groups, since cultural safety involves a process whereby “personal well-being, as well as social and cultural frames of reference, is acknowledged – even if not fully understood” (Fulcher, 2001, p. 153). As Bin-Sallik (2003) argues, a culturally safe approach emphasises the uniqueness of each person, which is critical in cross-cultural encounters.

Why cultural safety? Applicability as a teaching approach

Although Ramsden and Spoonley (1994) refer to *Kawa Whakaruruhau* as an educational process, the literature on the concept’s application as a teaching framework is sparse, even within the nursing discipline (Arieli, Friedman, & Hirschfeld, 2012). Concurrently, the concept refers to a wider range of factors other than *culture* itself, such as sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity and (dis)ability (De & Richardson, 2008; Papps & Ramsden, 1996). Indeed, cultural safety’s underpinning values originate from social and political movements among marginalised groups such as people with a mental illness, older adults, gay communities, women, people with disabilities, and Indigenous people (Richardson & Carryer, 2005). The principles thus apply to *culture* in its broadest sense (Papps & Ramsden), meaning that cultural safety is particularly suited to effectively teaching commencing students about a broad range of contemporary topics in human services and social work programs.

Yet, embedding principles of cultural safety in teaching remains challenging (Gibbs,

2005; Richardson & Carryer, 2005), given that this process requires several shifts in personal and institutional values (Spence, 2005). A culturally safe approach can only be embedded within teaching or social work programs if institutions themselves embrace the framework’s core tenets (Brascoupé & Waters, 2009). Consequently, despite institutional broad commitments to equity and diversity issues, systemic constraints can limit the applicability of the concept to curricula and teaching philosophies, illustrating how tertiary institutions are still perceived as “tiptoeing” around this issue (Gibbs, 2005). Since examples of the application of cultural safety in a teaching context are sparse, discussions surrounding its inclusion in first year pedagogy are still nascent, albeit innovative, and require further attention.

Integrating cultural safety into a first year course

The course discussed here is a compulsory first year unit¹ that enables all commencing students to explore equity and diversity issues early on in their learning. The course is designed around five key topic areas or modules: (i) theoretical concepts of intersectionality (Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001) and cultural safety; migrant and refugee issues, and working with interpreters; (ii) mental health; (iii) disability; (iv) sexual and gender diversity; and (v) ageing. Rather than offering one whole course focusing solely on cultural diversity, several equity and diversity topics are explored concurrently to highlight the links among key issues in their complexity instead of

¹ A semester-long teaching activity. Synonymous with subject, course and paper.

adopting a *silo* approach. For example, the ageing lecture includes a guest speaker who is a Sudanese elder and grandparent. To ensure coherency while exploring a broad range of content, a framework with the acronym CAMPER (key Characteristics, Australian context, Models and frameworks, Policies, Experiential learning, Research trends) was developed to enable students to consider and absorb the content on at times vastly different topics. As a key strategy, the course makes explicit links between cultural safety and the five equity areas identified. This means that the cultural safety framework is established within the first week of the semester as a philosophy informing the course; students are then encouraged to consider subsequent topics (mental health, disability, sexual and gender diversity, ageing) from this standpoint.

To establish a thorough understanding of cultural safety from the outset, the content is drawn from various sources including: material from the Nursing Council of New Zealand (2011); definitions of cultural safety by Papps and Ramsden (1996); discussions on the concept from Fulcher (2001), and De and Richardson (2008); a Canadian example where cultural safety was applied to understanding a migrant setting (Baker, 2007); and an Australian example of culturally safe maternity care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (Kruske et al., 2006). The diversity of examples – paired with the diversity within the student cohort itself – triggers intense discussions about practice approaches that ensure service users feel culturally safe as part of professional relationships. The first written assessment requires students to apply the concept to practice settings of their choice, i.e., by explaining what kind of practices would be

considered as culturally safe. Students are thus challenged to think critically about embedding cultural safety principles in their practice framework, by articulating how the key tenets can transform their approach.

Discussion

Diversity topics are bound to remain critical to human services and social work education. For instance, reflecting upon race relations in Australia, van den Berg (2010) observes that “racist attitudes have become more covert, and are a subtle mixture of paternalism, arrogance and the assumption of white privilege” (p. 137). Therefore, diversity frameworks clearly need to remain at the core of pedagogy from the first year of study to ensure practice is respectful and sensitive. The exploration of topics linked to diversity, often the source of tensions within and outside university (Arieli et al., 2012; Laurs, Eggeling, & Harris, 2013), can yield discussions rich in exchange of personal viewpoints and narratives when facilitated in a supportive way. Thus, *Kawa Whakaruruhau* enriches the learning experiences of first year students through the process of understanding diversity concepts and can have a transformative impact throughout their lifecycle (i.e., their entire program). This is a good start, albeit far from sufficient. A broader pedagogical shift is required to fully embed the concept of cultural safety in curricula and institutional values so that it is not limited to one course or to the first year of study solely.

Shifting individual attitudes

As Saleh, Anngela-Cole, and Boateng, (2011) argue, “diversity knowledge is a

first step in training, but internalising changes in attitudes and behaviour takes time" (p. 256). For example, New Zealander Nursing students who genuinely engaged with a culturally safe approach recognised the value of being respectful and non-judgmental, and the importance of understanding their own culture in relation to practice (Warren, 2003). The course discussed here demonstrates how integrating cultural safety as part of a first year course has the potential to shape future workers' practice philosophies. However, to further modify students' ability to engage fully with cultural safety principles, it is critical that this notion be embedded throughout undergraduate programs (Gibbs, 2005) or the student lifecycle. If the concept is not conveniently isolated to one, neatly packaged and delineated course (de Anda, 2007), students can then gradually become familiar with and apply cultural safety to different aspects of their learning. A culturally safe approach "does not then become something you 'have to do', it becomes something you 'want to do' because it becomes a part of you" (Gibbs, 2005, p. 358). Students' attitudes towards cultural diversity would shift from mere awareness of differences to a genuine understanding of safe practice principles and deeper self-awareness.

Shifting institutional paradigms

To counter the marginal presence of cultural safety in human services and social work programs, students would benefit from additional avenues within and outside classrooms to further explore the concept, paired with a push for integrating culturally safe values in curricula and teaching approaches across the student lifecycle. A shift in existing institutional commitment to equity and diversity issues

is therefore required; instead of reinforcing 'equal opportunity' or 'culturally appropriate' paradigms, which may have connotations of 'special' treatment, tertiary institutions should formally name cultural safety as their approach (Bin-Sallik, 2003). Institutional commitment can thus challenge perceptions of how cultural diversity issues should be taught in university settings and understood in practice contexts. Consequently, students should be exposed to a range of courses on diversity and be immersed in a culturally safe environment to ensure their learning in an introductory course is reinforced by appropriately integrated content in the broader curriculum over time (de Anda, 2007).

Conclusion

The overall aim of teaching about cultural diversity is to incite students to "continuously examine, challenge, question, and expand their cultural assumptions" (Lee & Greene, 2004, p. 24). This transformative process is particularly relevant for first year students from culturally homogeneous (usually white, middle class) backgrounds with limited exposure to ethnically and culturally (and otherwise) diverse communities (Saleh et al., 2011). Thus, courses on cultural diversity should not only value students' lived experiences and biographies, but also create an atmosphere where students explore how their own cultural frameworks and biases affect their ways of seeing the world and relating to others (de Anda, 2007). The application of 'Kawa Whakaruruhau' in areas other than nursing can provide novel perspectives on the strengths of this philosophy and shed more light on the constraints of teaching cultural safety as a core principle, particularly in human services and social work. Finally,

further discussion is warranted on the best ways to teach cultural safety to first year students "in a supportive and productive manner that empowers students [and] teachers" (Ramsden & Spoonley, 1994, p. 171). Despite the criticism that cultural safety teachers can attract (Gibbs, 2005), the benefits of a culturally safe approach embedded in the curriculum can also extend to teachers (Lynn, 1998). It is hoped that the example provided here will incite human services and social work educators to consider how teaching diversity in a critical manner, particularly to first year students, can be enriched by the core tenets of cultural safety.

Acknowledgements

Support from the Griffith Health Institute is gratefully acknowledged.

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