

Chapter 6

Cultural Diversity: Misconceptions, Misinterpretations, and Misunderstandings in the Classroom

Donna M. Velliari

University of South Australia, Australia

Janine M. Pierce

University of South Australia, Australia

ABSTRACT

Autoethnography is a genre of writing that connects the personal to the cultural, placing the self within a social context. These texts are usually written in the first-person and feature dialogue, emotion, and self-consciousness as relational and institutional stories are affected by history, culture and social structure; authors use their 'own' experiences to look deeply at 'self-other' interactions by starting with 'self'. Both authors, educators at the Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology (EIBT) responded to the question: In the context of EIBT, what significant professional experiences of miscommunication have had an impact on your pedagogical praxis today? Educators are constantly in the process of negotiating the social, cultural and educational forces, trends and structures within which they work. These researcher-practitioners share the 'lived' cultural misconceptions, misinterpretations, and misunderstandings they have experienced in this school setting and in their own classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers' professional learning begins with an 'examination of experience' and of the stories enacted throughout their personal lives, schools and society (Beattie, 2001, p. vi). Encounters with students from varied ethnic, geographic, linguistic, and religious upbringings, and/or backgrounds can invite critical awareness of commonalities and points of difference (e.g., age, class, citizenship, clan, customs, family dynamics, gender, generation, history, interests, kinship, level of maturity, lifestyle, manners, morals and ethics, political beliefs, rituals and practices, sexual orientation, socio-linguistics preferences, relational patterns, traditions, value systems, and ways of thinking). The central goal of this chapter is to share the

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2069-6.ch006

authors' own experiences and to enable improved understanding of how educators in general can advance their pedagogical performance to promote greater rapport among increasingly diverse student cohorts.

The term 'cross-cultural' is used to describe not just native-non-native interactions, but any communication between two people who, in any particular domain, may not share a common linguistic or cultural background. Practitioner research is an iterative process; research and practice are inextricably linked and continuously evolving. This chapter presents 'authentic' educator-practitioner insights into professional experiences of (un)intentional miscommunication/misunderstandings at an international pre-university 'pathway' setting, so as to uncover events that may have impacted on their teaching. Thus, through an autoethnographic exploration of our own practices, our 'subject positions, social locations, interpretations, and personal experiences' continue to be examined 'through the refracted medium of narrators' voices' (Chase, 2005, p. 666), glimpses of which are imparted as this chapter unfolds.

BACKGROUND

The Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology (EIBT) was founded in 1998 and has since established a strong profile for pre-university pathways. Specific to this research are the students who enter EIBT to undertake a Diploma in:

1. Business;
2. Engineering; and
3. Information Technology

EIBT diplomas comprise the same courses that constitute the 'first-year' of a Bachelor's degree at the partner university; *The University of Adelaide* or the *University of South Australia*. EIBT international students are generally between the ages of 17-23 years and represent more than 20 different nationalities/ethnicities at any one time (Velliari & Coleman-George, 2015a, 2015b; Velliari, Willis, & Breen, 2015a, 2015b; Velliari, Willis, & Pierce, 2015). The impetus for this research was the recognition that—as an Australian 'pathway' provider—EIBT lecturers face many social, cultural and educational challenges resulting from greater numbers, nations and ability-levels within its international student demographic (refer to Table 1).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity Formation

'Culture' is the fundamental building block of 'identity' and the development of a strong cultural identity is essential to students' healthy sense of *who they are* and *where they belong*. There are many ways of defining 'culture'; a *broad* concept that encompasses the beliefs, knowledge, language, lifestyle, norms, practices, skills, traditions, and values *shared* by a group of people. Cultures can be recognised by 'collective' patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and affective understandings (Barrett, Byram, Lazar, Mompoin-Gaillard, & Philippou, 2013; Luke, 2003; Vandebroek, 1999; Velliari & Coleman-George, 2014). These are learned through a process of socialisation. Within cultural groups,

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