

The Role of ESL Professionals in the Promotion of Culturally Inclusive Universities

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The Challenges of a Borderless Society

The world in which we live is becoming increasingly global. Ever-evolving technological advancements have increased the speed and efficiency of international communication, bringing together diverse communities and cultures as never before. In a world in which distance no longer prevents instantaneous communication between nations, the ability to negotiate other cultural traditions, value systems, and languages has become a vital component of education. Accordingly, universities in the 21st century are constantly striving to discover ways in which they can best prepare their students for survival within the borderless world in which they must function. As Dr. Julius E. Coles of Morehouse College Atlanta has explained “If our students are to compete in a world market and in a world environment, they have to be prepared” (Morehouse College Aims, 2001).

At the same time, international mobility continues to increase, and the partial or full completion of tertiary study in a foreign country has become a popular option for university students. As such, many university campuses retain a significant international student presence. This important feature of university life is not merely a source of external income but also represents a unique opportunity for students to gain increased cultural competence. Australia's Minister for Education Dr. David Kemp recently suggested that “The presence of overseas students in Australia's university campuses and schools gives local students exposure to a wide range of cultures and helps prepare them for participation in our ever expanding world economy” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000).

As universities and colleges worldwide continue to pursue overseas enrolments, the need for formal staff training in relation to international student education is becoming increasingly apparent in many institutions. Though the literature regarding overseas student intake discusses the advantages presented by international student participation in university life, the exact manner in which benefits may be maximised in the classroom is less defined. The central question to be addressed relates to the manner in

which the resource of international enrolments may be utilised in order to maximise learner outcomes for both domestic and overseas students. This is an important consideration for all tertiary institutions, which must be addressed if universities are to make the most of the enormous potential for meaningful cultural exchange that is associated with international student enrolments.

This paper argues that in order to promote optimal learner outcomes from this situation, all university staff must be aware of the advantages of international student participation at the tertiary level. This will require extensive efforts to promote a culture-conscious university environment that is appreciative and inclusive of all backgrounds. It is logical for ESL professionals, experienced in dealing with cultural diversity within an educational context, to play a central role in the overall promotion of a culturally inclusive university environment.

The Benefits of International Student Enrolments

The enormous benefits of international student enrolments are evident in the interactions of domestic and international classmates. These frequently represent meaningful and enriching educational experiences that give “real world” substance to the theoretical learning gained in tertiary institutions. This is particularly true for courses such as education, cultural studies, and history, but also applies to any area that requires interpersonal contact such as business, medicine and hospitality. Completing tertiary study overseas generally increases cultural tolerance and empathy, and allows student to examine their own cultural identity (Neff, 2001). Furthermore, the participation of international students in university courses provides a unique opportunity for the establishment of international professional links that may serve to assist graduates long after they have completed their formal studies (Jolley, 1997).

At a macro level, an understanding of diverse cultural traditions creates empathy for contrasting ways of life, which is an important pre-requisite for forging closer bilateral ties between countries (Jolley, 1997). As Irwin (1996) has pointed out, international student enrolment at the tertiary level inevitably leads to changes within the relationships between the sending and host nations as their inhabitants have the opportunity to interact. A properly trained educator can facilitate meaningful cross-cultural exchange in the university classroom, effectively providing domestic students with an “international experience” in the context of their own country.

Maximising International Student Input and Learner Outcomes

However, in order for universities and learners to gain the utmost benefit from the enrolment of international students, intercultural communication within the tutorial

classroom must be actively promoted. Although cultural inclusivity has become a pivotal feature of university policy statements, efforts to promote cultural sensitivity and exchange within the university environment will only be successful if educators are equipped with the necessary skills and insights to act as cultural mediators. The rhetoric of policy statements either becomes manifest or contravened in the everyday experiences of students at the “grass-roots” level. The process of reconciling differences between the familiar and the foreign and developing strategies to manage the transition between the two spheres, may be greatly assisted by the provision of support in the most basic of university structures—the classroom. Cultural awareness and sensitivity on the part of the educator can also assist with the “crossing of boundaries” between the international student's traditional culture and the foreign educational context (Au, 1993, p. 10). This acts to prevent the marginalisation of international students from the learning community and encourages their participation and contribution to classroom processes—a positive outcome for all. Cultural plurality cannot be something that is embraced only at the administrative level—it must permeate all structures within the university institution.

Meeting the Needs of University Educators

In order to meet the needs of educators working with international students, ongoing professional development is required. The task of negotiating unfamiliar cultural backgrounds and approaches to learning can be a difficult one, particularly for those lecturers and tutors who have little or no training in teaching methodology and minimal skills for dealing with classroom diversity. It is imperative that issues pertaining to culture be addressed with all university educators, as it is the underlying beliefs, values and perspectives that determine student expectations and behaviours in a learning environment (Brown, 1994). Failure to do so has the potential to lead to misunderstanding in the tutorial classroom and seriously limit the opportunity for student learning.

It is essential that lecturers and tutors are provided with information on facilitating cross-cultural discussions, stimulating meaningful exchanges, and encouraging the exploration of “otherness” with the aim of promoting awareness and appreciation (Jones, 1995, p. 1). Furthermore, critical issues relating to the manifestation of culture in the classroom must be addressed in order to inform educators on such topics as teacher/learner communication styles, assumptions about the acquisition of knowledge, and issues pertaining to plagiarism (Au, 1993). Of equal importance are the cultural implications of everyday situations that occur in tutorials such as arriving late to class, as well as learner characteristics such as willingness to guess, risk-taking behaviours,

participation in group discussions, and ability to cope with unstructured learning contexts (Au, 1993; Murray, 1992; Ruby & Ladd, 1999).

ESL Professionals Facilitating Staff Development

The underlying issue remains one of professional development. There is a need for tertiary educators to have access to on-going in-service training in order to gain an appreciation of the impact of culture on attitudes to learning and classroom processes. The essential factor in successfully establishing a culturally inclusive context for learning is the teacher's own cultural awareness (Stempleski & Tomalin, 1993). This requires the teacher to maintain an understanding of his/her own "cultural baggage" and the ramifications of cultural background on instructional practices and overall world view (Stempleski & Tomalin, 1993, p. 5). Damen (1987) suggests that the importance of training teachers to be "cultural guides" is not always recognised and further asserts that in order to "succeed in the goal of assisting world travellers to adjust to their new worlds to the degree and to the level they desire, we, as trainers, must first be trained" (p. 6).

For some time, the ESL profession has acknowledged and actively promoted cross-cultural awareness among teachers and students and has supported the establishment of culturally inclusive language classrooms. Therefore, who better to advise or facilitate university professional development programs on such topics than ESL or second language teachers? ESL professionals working in the university context are a valuable source of information regarding cultures of learning and have much to contribute to the intercultural competence of all university educators. As Clair-Adger and Temple (1999) suggest "effective professional development is embedded in the reality of schools' and teachers' work and is designed with teacher input. It fosters critical reflection and meaningful collaboration." ESL professionals can appreciate the experiences of those working at the "coal face," and therefore have a natural empathy for the needs of their colleagues. This is a vital pre-requisite for developing useful training initiatives that will provide lecturers with the necessary skills to cope with a culturally diverse classroom. Judging by the input of those in attendance at the Conference in February, Hawaii TESOL 2001, the work of ESL professionals in Hawaiian tertiary institutions to inform and instruct on the principles of multicultural educational practices is testimony to the benefits and breakthroughs that can result from cross-disciplinary training sessions.

It must be acknowledged that the current economic climate, with increasing moves toward a "user-pays" system for tertiary education, means that funding for staff development in universities is often minimal. However when ESL professionals are able to work closely with non-TESOL qualified university staff, the institutional

environment is enhanced, and this in itself has important financial ramifications. Learners who perceive the university to be an institution that actively seeks to meet the individual needs of its students are far more likely to return to that particular tertiary institution for later study and to encourage the enrolment of family and friends (Jolley, 1997). In today's competitive environment where educational institutions must actively work to secure enrolments, this gives the university an effective advantage over its rivals. This, combined with the potential for increased cultural exchange and understanding, is a significant incentive for implementing a program of staff training facilitated by ESL professionals. ESL lecturers can assist their colleagues in developing flexible, responsive teaching plans that incorporate many different learning approaches and styles. As Au (1993), asserts, "Culturally responsive instruction occurs when the diverse backgrounds of students are taken into account when deciding on instructional practices" (p. 13). The learning opportunities that result are enriching to all students and teachers involved.

Conclusions

It is vital that universities encourage international enrolments, however, simply placing the students into classes after they fulfil the English language entry requirement is not satisfactory. Internationalisation involves more than international student enrolments, but requires modification to teaching/learning approaches, the provision of support services for students, and the training of educators to facilitate learning within a multicultural environment (Jolley 1997). Merely encouraging international enrolments without looking to matters of staff training will fail to stimulate the type of intercultural exchange that is potentially available to all institutions.

Note: Based on a paper presented to the Hawaii TESOL 2001 TESOL Roundtable, held at the University of Hawaii, February 10. The author wishes to thank all those who contributed their experiences and views to the discussion.

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About the Author

Rachel Burke has taught ESL in a number of different contexts, ranging from high school and university preparatory courses, through to working with migrant, refugee and study vacation groups. She is currently completing doctoral studies, examining attitudes surrounding international student enrolment in Australian tertiary institutions. The author invites further contributions from those interested in this issue. Correspondence may be directed to Ms Rachel Burke, Arts and Sciences, Australian Catholic University, PO Box 247, Everton Hills 4053, Brisbane, QLD, Australia, or email: rburke106@hotmail.com.