**Wilf Malcolm Institute
of Educational Research**
Te Pūtahi Rangahau Mātauranga o Wilf Malcolm

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO

Title of Issue/section: Volume 23, Issue 2, 2018

Guest Editor: Dianne Forbes

Editor: Noeline Wright

Examining the need for culturally responsive digital learning

Heather Vail
Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology
New Zealand

Keywords

Education; tertiary; international; global classroom; case studies; digital technology

Abstract

This article addresses the pedagogy and practice of tertiary learning, and in particular it asks, how is there a need for culturally responsive digital learning? Research shows how, worldwide, classroom content is being delivered through shifting, digitally-infused curriculum (van Dijck, 2013; Netsafe, 2016; Orr, 2016; Revere & Kovach, 2011). The focus of this article is to examine ways in which online, participatory structures work to engage all learners. In New Zealand tertiary contexts, there is an increasing number of culturally diverse student cohorts (particularly due to international education marketing and strategies [Ministry of Education, 2017]). I consider how common spaces in the digital platforms available for educational purposes can be seen to embody a common culture. Research informing this article comes from two studies I have undertaken. The first is a practical inquiry of the use of online spaces in the 'global classroom' (a term defined in this case as the world wide web of information, and also an institution's role to educate within a multinational, multicultural population). The second is a qualitative look into how educators discovered effective learning practices, for international students in particular, based upon a study that included educator interviews at one tertiary institute. Merging data from both studies indicated that incorporating digital learning through the now-familiar online spaces requires more dynamic, culturally responsive pedagogy. This research aims to provide some improved insight for all educators looking to answer this posed question.

Background

In 2011, New Zealand passed legislation to establish a Crown agency for the burgeoning sector of international education. 'Education New Zealand' became the operational entity, heralding the slogan 'Think New'. Positioned online for greater global accessibility, it was also set up to "enhance the marketing and promotion of New Zealand and New Zealand education providers, and carry out overseas representation" (Education Counts, 2018, n.p.). Six years after the Education New Zealand branding was put in play, according to Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment Minister Paul Goldsmith (2017), international education became the country's fourth largest export earner,

contributing $4.5 billion to New Zealand's economy whilst upholding 33,000 jobs. Immigration New Zealand's 2016 publication on international student visas notes an increase of 4% in the Institute of Technology Polytechnic (ITP) sector (Education New Zealand, 2016). Nationalities represented at ITPs from 2014 to 2016 were listed as follows: India – 39%; China – 35%; Other – 20%; Japan, Sri Lanka and Korea each 2% (ENZ, 2016).

The international student cohorts represented bring their own 'norms' of education (Saleem, 2016), which, when added together and mixed with domestic student norms, creates a quilt-like aggregation of learner understanding and expression. Amidst this multi-normal diaspora, a shared commonality between students can be found in the use of digital technology, which represent a similar culture – an online, global culture (van Dijck, 2013; Orr, 2016). Interacting with each other through digital platforms provides a means for students to participate with data both globally (from across the world) and locally (within the classroom). Thus, students bring their personal and cultural biases into the global classroom. New Zealand learning outcomes are supported by the Ministry of Education's International Capabilities (2014). Importance is placed on youth maturing in their wider community, nationally, overseas, and "in the virtual international space" (Ministry of Education, 2014, p3). The majority of non-Western students added to New Zealand tertiary student enrolments would indicate a need to consider culturally responsive curriculum for those who uphold and facilitate best contemporary learning practices (Netsafe, 2016).

The active, participatory nature of including digital technology in the classroom has been termed 'connectivism' (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012), and allows an instructor to guide (not lead) the learning. Exploring topics or concepts on a shared, online pathway provides an open, inclusive approach that by its nature must appreciate the globally connected culture of fluid, digital spaces. Accordingly, studies have found that contributing to this democratic platform, there is an opportunity for the definition and creation of new global (and local) narratives (Dow, 2008; Fried, 2016; Orr, 2016). Based on these notions, and when applied to education, the new learning narratives could show the value of instigating an adaptive, digital pedagogy.

A participatory culture of digital learning has been alive and well for some time, as seen with the global reach of online education agencies such as FutureLearn, claiming 7,252,188 learners (FutureLearn, n.d.) and Coursera, which maintains provision of "universal access to the world's best education, partnering with top universities and organizations to offer courses online" (Coursera, 2018, n.p.). These and other online educational courses often use a mix of video and textual content, accessed by participants as topics that require a response. Depending on the subject matter, students are requested to comment on each topic as it relates to them, personally or professionally. The thread of participant responses includes students responding to students. In this style of globally accessible classroom platforms, because the students enrolled online are of mixed nationalities, the dialogue can often become current, inclusive and expansive.

How does such a multi-perspective student lens (a dimensional, yet singular element) view academic content? When examining the New Zealand tertiary context, the opportunity arises for educators to consider cultures, and facilitate ways to engage responsive digital learning, class by class.

Methodology

Located within my inquiry to examine culturally responsive pedagogy, I used an interpretive ontological stance, one that maintains truth is subjective and defined according to different vantage points (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Accordingly, my research for this paper is informed through mixed methods, an approach which has been described by Teddlie & Tashakkori (2011) as a 'third' methodological movement that looks through an eclectic lens, both practical and intuitive and appreciates a pluralism of perspectives.

Thus, methods I used to gather data from the two studies included the development, test and review of online content added to a specific classroom curriculum (Vail, 2017), and interviewing educators about their experiences of interacting with international students (Vail, 2018). A qualitative thematic analysis was undertaken of the various data, gathered from one tertiary institute.

In a class related to technical writing, in which skills are developed to communicate specialised information (Barnett & O'Rourke, 2011), discussion forums in Moodle were used, modeled on digital education agencies previously described. Our online class platform was intended for students as a homework space outside of the classroom. Alongside the files that contained theory and literature (topics covered in class), students were to complete an interactive element based on a video case study of a local person in some 'plight'. Students were encouraged to relate the class topic to a real-life situation, one that required a solution. Students watched the video, posted their responses, and replied to each other's reactions in the online forum. The case studies included, for example a petrol station manager, who identified as a Sikh from India, figuring which social media would be best to use when communicating with staff; a Māori Student Union representative talking about teamwork strategies; and a Pākehā web page developer finding ways to gauge specific audiences. Students watched the case study videos, then voted on which solution out of several listed they believed to be the best option. The vote page subsequently appeared in graph form, so each student could see their vote in relation to others' in the class, manifesting as a visual peer engagement. This online student input was used in conjunction with in-class, face-to-face discussions in order to emphasise relatable contexts of learning. Results from this observational study informed a list of findings, which support including culturally responsive digital learning, as detailed further in the next section.

Complementing practice-based classroom research, I also gained data from interviewing eight educators, who told of their experiences teaching international students. Their views identified international learner preferences, as well as the effectiveness of some approaches the educators had tested to create a more accommodating curriculum. Of those interviewed, most had classes comprised of 50% or more international students. Key questions related to asking tertiary educators how their experiences helped decide what worked best pedagogically for international students to succeed. Using thematic analysis (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011), I distilled a number of themes from the data. Findings coincided with the value placed on the importance of developing culturally responsive learning curriculum.

Findings

The evidence indicated that using online case studies as a routine focus for class topics works favourably on several counts. As depicted in the graphic below, the use of online case studies provided the comfort of 'home' for those far from it. Students' feelings of ease were met from accessing digital spaces, while multi-lingual translation made information accessible. As well, a participatory culture was activated through engaged learning, and in-class conversation helped direct, reflect, even embed students' understanding of a topic (Vail, 2017).

Figure 1.   Familiar digital platform's role in supporting a cohort of mixed nationality
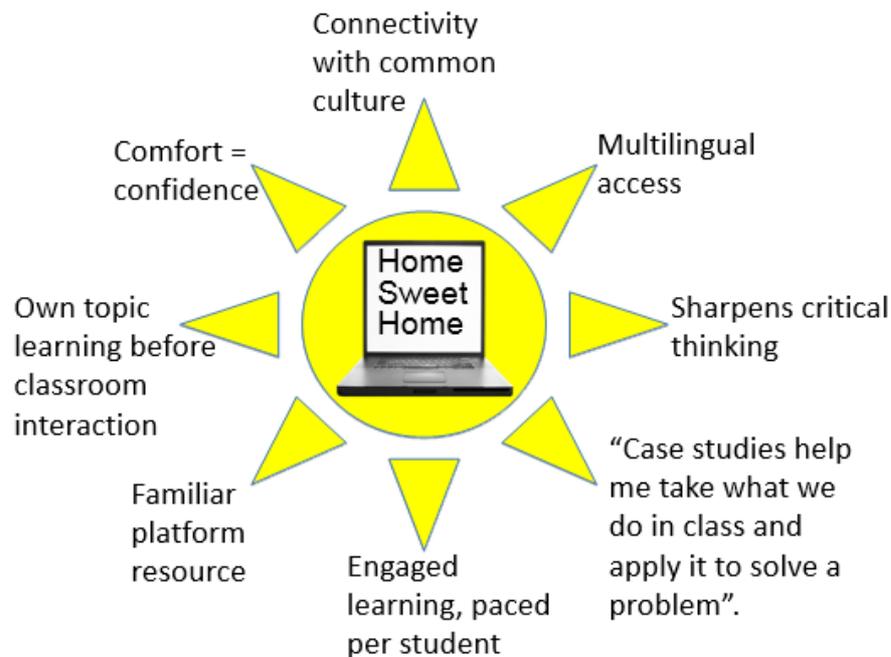
Student participation and engagement was encouraged by familiar, shared spaces. Peer-to-peer responsivity was manifest through the online postings, and subsequently, in-class discussions. Student postings embellished the learning topics, and building extra elements into the curriculum that teachers encouraged, but had not organised or included as part of the learning. Thus, the culture of the students directed the culture of the learning concerns. Topics related to the classroom content arose that would not have otherwise. In a sense, the development of culturally responsive digital learning emerged organically from this familiar level of online participation.

Similar findings from educator interviews reflected the themes of needing to recognise and implement a widened scope of culturally responsive curriculum, designed to encourage international student success. Educator reflection by way of institutional forums was viewed as necessary; of those interviewed, all agreed that staff discussion on 'global education' would be useful at the institute (Vail, 2018). These educators believed their job is to figure how to lead the learning, exemplified in the context of international student learning by one educator of post-graduate students saying, "Despite struggling in our New Zealand tertiary system, in their country all postgrad students are clever, but you have to find a way for their brilliance to shine, and sometimes you have to find another means for that to happen" (Vail, 2018, p. 97).

While many themes emerged from the data, the following sample summarises how educators depict the need for cultural responsivity (Vail, 2018, pp. 80-82):

- It is the educators' role to accommodate student success
- The process to address international student concerns is critical and ongoing
- It is hard to change students' learning norms
- Manage classes so that students participate/speak out

- Bonding amongst class members occurs through shared experiences
- Alleviate stress through valuing culture

The data collected also showed cell phones to be ever-present in the classroom; hence integrating the familiar, digital platform, as discussed previously, proved an effective resource for learning strategies.

Discussion

It could be said that the steady flow of international students into tertiary institutes in New Zealand is as dynamic as the ever-shifting global digital information platforms. This research indicates that a new approach to allow for and build upon differences can strengthen the foundations of the shifting platforms of tertiary learning. And subsequently, an emphasis can be placed on the value of cultural literacy for educators.

It is interesting to consider that, as global citizens engage and differences congregate, the popular notion of a cultural intelligence quotient (also known as CQ [Earley & Mosakowski, 2004]) advocates for establishing a global and domestic cultural competence. The research of Hammer, Nishida and Wiseman (1989) was among the first to examine the predictors of intercultural competence and found that the more an individual can comprehend different cultures, the more likely that they have an ability to minimise misunderstandings. For educators, a CQ could acknowledge one's capability to function effectively when working with students from multicultural contexts; hence a 'high CQ' can be more reflective, thus effective, when facilitating successful learning strategies for diverse cultural cohorts. However such a CQ is developed, formally or informally, through classroom trials or staff professional development, the evidence argues that such a process is warranted.

Conclusion

We inhabit a world where 'Google' has become a verb. Research indicates that global citizens will continue to rely on the Internet and digital technology platforms in order to actively learn from, and interact with, each other (van Dijck, 2013). Shared, democratic social connections are constantly being made, unrestricted by time zones and geographical barriers (Jenkins, 2009; Orr, 2016).

Using digital platforms for curriculum to support student learning is not a new initiative. However, as an increasingly diversified cultural cohort participates at the tertiary level, research indicates culturally inclusive pedagogical approaches are appropriate to consider and implement. As this article suggests, based upon in-class research conducted with online case studies, as well as perspectives gained from staff interviewed, each educator has the opportunity to fine-tune their cultural responsivity, per subject and scenario.

Educators can embrace the opportunity to implement culturally responsive digital learning. Reflecting the digital world, a classroom that is fluid and encouraging for participatory learning is a classroom-in-progress.

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