

CONFERENCE PRESENTATION ON Teaching Multicultural and Multilingual classes at an institution of Higher Learning

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Introduction

Multicultural education

Is not a concept that lulls the mind, but rather one that prompts debate. It has significantly impacted on higher education in South Africa. Its proponents have argued that education that excludes the experience and contributions of other diverse cultural groups robs its entire society of the treasures endowed in the multicultural nature of that society.

•Multicultural education therefore is a concept that incorporates cultural diversity and provide equality in educational institutions. For it to become reality, the total environment must reflect a commitment to multicultural education.

•The diverse cultural backgrounds of students are as important in developing effective instructional strategies as are their physical and mental capabilities

Students Concerns

- Language at historically Afrikaans speaking institutions of Higher Learning seems to be the main problem on which students focus when embarking on strike action. This became evident recently when students at my university embarked on an unofficial strike over rumors of the increase of fees for tuition and hostel in 2008. The SRC cited the following main student grievances:
- Educational Standards
- Afrikaans Instruction
- High failure rates

The following five grievances were put forward by the SRC:

- When class questions are asked in Afrikaans, the discussion switch to Afrikaans but the lecturer does not translate the questions and the discussion.
- The use of Afrikaans as medium of instruction and school/faculty meetings limit student/SRC participation.
- The prescribing of Afrikaans textbooks – especially in Civil Engineering.
- The 70% use of Afrikaans in some classes – especially in Hospitality.
- Afrikaans instruction – who pays for extra – classes being offered, is it the participants or every students

Continuation of students concerns

One can understand the grievances of students about the use of Afrikaans or medium of instruction since most students from SADC countries especially those from Lesotho and Botswana – of which the University has quite a number do not understand Afrikaans at all.

The composition of the students' population at Central University of Technology (CUT) roughly consists of 30% "Afrikaans" speaking students and when issues of language are discussed this group of students seems to be left out of the equation. CUT is a former historically Afrikaans institution of higher learning and in the past Afrikaans was the sole medium of instruction. This group of students, who constitute 30% of the CUT student population, is often not vocal about their grievances on the issue of language

Data Collection Instrument

To collect data for this study, I used the university "Evaluation of the lecturer by students" questionnaire instrument. In this questionnaire students are asked to be as honest and objective as possible in their responses to the questions on the lecturer's teaching methods and their own experiences with regard to the lecturer his/her teaching methods and the subject itself

- The completion for this form is on a voluntary and anonymous basis.
- The questionnaire (available only in English) consist of four sections namely:
 - The lecturer as a person
 - The lecturer as academic leader
 - The subject
 - The student himself/herself

The questionnaire is a Likert Scale type of instrument from 4-Always to 0-Never. The assumption in a Likert Scale is that the interval between each number on the scale is used to register the extent of the student's satisfaction with the lecturer as a person or as academic leader. The higher the scale (4-Always) the higher the level of satisfaction. The items are independent so that no answer to an item depends on the responses to any other items.

Results

It was the result of the second section of the questionnaire that I was interested in as students in this section provide written remarks to a series of questions; e.g.

- What is the strongest positive characteristic of the lecturer?
 - What is the strongest negative characteristic of the lecturer?
 - In your opinion, what can be done to improve the subject?
 - In your opinion, what are the short comings of the subject?
 - How would you be able to improve your performance in this subject?
- e.t.c

Responses

- "Because I thought I know more English than I could, I am disappointed because I can't talk it in class".
- "Die dosent het dalk regte kwalifikasies maar kan nie 'n les oordra of kommunikeer nie". (The lecturer maybe possesses the right qualifications but cannot put the lesson through or communicate).
- "Mens kry die gevoel daar word teen Afrikaans gediskrimineer". (A person feels that Afrikaans is discriminated against)
- "Die dosent kan nie tot studente se vlak daal nie". (The lecturer cannot come down to the level of students).

Continuation of results

Such responses are typical of students from monocultural education system which, among other things,

- Does not recognize diversity and differences in class,
- Exclude and ignore the contributions of students of colour, woman and other subordinated groups,
- Tries to prevent and defuse conflict in the classroom,
- Places power and authority with the teacher, creating an unsafe and destructive environment for a women and students of colour,
- Blames women and black students for possible lower performance and participation.
- Sees any concessions to a diverse student population as compromising excellence.

Didactic guidelines for a multicultural lectureroom

This requires from us as lecturers that we should:

- Place the student at the centre of the teaching and learning process,
- Promote human rights and respect for cultural differences,
- Believe that all students can learn,
- Acknowledge and build on the life histories and experience of student's micro-cultural membership.
- Critically analyze oppression and power relationships in order to understand Racism, Sexism, Classism and Discrimination against the disabled, young, aged, blacks and women.
- Critique society in the interest of social justice and equality,
- Participate in collective social action to ensure a democratic society

Continuation of didactic guidelines

From the aforementioned, it becomes evident that a multicultural lectureroom is therefore, one in which,

- The lecturer is aware of how his of her cultural identity impacts learning and lecturerooms dynamics,
- The content, readings, language, assignments, tests and evaluation reflects diverse cultural styles,
- The lectureroom norms and ground rules are reflective of cultural diversity,
- The participation of all students is sought, and culturally diverse style of communication and participation are recognized.
- Differences are appreciated and welcomed and ways of using differences to enrich everybody's educational experience are sought,
- Conflict, both overt or covert, is used constructively to negotiate differences, establish honest dialogue and increase learning,
- A multicultural lectureroom is therefore one which is Participatory, Fair, Liberating, Enriching and Humane.

Conclusion

- Good teaching is to know your subjects and keep abreast of new developments in it,
- Good teaching is truth. If you do not know, to admit it. If you do know, to have the courage of your convictions and to speak them without equivocation at the appropriate moment,
- Good teaching is to know who you are, to speak in your own voice, to show your weakness as well as your strength,
- Good teaching is an art which requires discipline,
- Good teaching is being able to say to your students, teach me. I can learn from you,
- Good teaching is accepting the responsibility for helping to make the journey for your students, as interesting, as exciting and as rewarding as possible.

Finally good teaching in a multicultural content involves, understanding the experiences of your students from different cultural backgrounds, and using that knowledge to help them learn the subject matter, your sensitivity to those differences can be used to make students from the dominant culture, feel as comfortable in your class as those from the historically disadvantaged groups.