

Teaching in a multi-cultural environment: Promoting a culture of tolerance and mutual understanding.

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Introduction

Knowledge is power and often times this aspect of teaching is not properly asserted. Cultural misconceptions are a result of ignorance. South Africa is emerging from a period of racial oppression during which a large part of the population was disenfranchised. Both a private and public level the scars of three hundred year of oppression are still clearly visible. The process of healing has begun, and as educators, we have taken it upon ourselves to implement curricula that contribute to this process. The political settlement that was reached after the transfer of power to the new government required that the truth be told about past atrocities. This resulted in the now world famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was chaired by Bishop Desmond Tutu. The result of this commission was that victims of the system of Apartheid could get closure with regard to such atrocities. In such a system, the values, belief and practices of others were demeaned and disregarded. The education system must promote a common respect for culture and right to a cultural identity.

Language as a tool for healing

Culture is probably the most important consideration when teaching at a South African institution. The Republic of South Africa recognizes 11 official languages. I teach at a historically Afrikaans¹ (language spoken mostly by people of white and mixed descent) which requires an acute awareness not only of language, but also other cultural values. Most of the students who attend this university are white and Afrikaans speaking. There is also minority student body prefer English as a primary medium of instruction. The official university policy is that all undergraduate lectures should be conducted in Afrikaans, or to be more precise – predominantly Afrikaans. The interpretation of this requirement has varied from faculty to faculty. Some faculties interpret this to mean those lectures are to be conducted in Afrikaans only.

¹ Afrikaans is essentially 16th century Dutch as influenced by some African and Eastern languages. It is very different from any of the Nguni languages spoken by indigenous peoples of the region.

Others have created parallel medium classes that separate English and Afrikaans speaking students. This later approach has severe cost implications and is not commonly done. In the law faculty, where I teach, we have taken the approach that all English speaking students would have to be accommodated.

Most of the members of staff at the law faculty practice what we call “concurrent language teaching”. We endeavour to teach both languages in the same lecture, taking into account the “predominantly Afrikaans” requirement set by the university. All materials are produced in both languages and students may choose which language they want to be examined in. English speaking students are further accommodated with separate tutorials conducted in English.

This approach is not optimal for various reasons. However, since dual language use is promoted through such a compromise, one invariably finds a mix of students with various cultural, religious or racial backgrounds. Since language can be a tool that promotes certain values of belief, it is of critical importance to take note of such differences that have been alluded to above. The ability to use both languages correctly is a *sine qua non* for introducing and operating a current dual medium approach. The use of examples to illustrate legal problems may also create tension if the cultural context is not taken into account. In order to sensitize both new and existing staff members diversity workshops have been conducted to bring across this message. Interaction with students is not limited to the class room.

Cultural and religious practices: What happens outside the classroom?

Most interaction occurs outside of the classroom and here to the cultural context of interaction must be taken into account. A few examples here may be of value. Students sometimes fall ill and cannot write a test or an exam. The university regulations state that students must submit a doctor’s certificate in order to qualify for an alternative test. Since some of our students come from rural areas with very strong cultural identities, it is not surprising that some of them will submit a “sick note” or certificate that has been issued by a traditional healer. Until recently, the status of traditional healers has been dubious in South Africa. For most rural people the traditional healer is the only person they can turn to when they become ill. The

university has not taken note of this fact and certificates issued by traditional healers are not accepted.

In recent years the issue of cultural or religious holidays and practices has been hotly debated. For Muslim students who write examination during *Ramdaan*, it is essential to break their fast at precisely the right time. Since the practice is to write examinations towards the evening, Muslim students are often busy writing exams when the time comes to break their fast. Such students are now accommodated through a system of supervision that provides *Iftar* and a *jamaat khana* where the communal prayers may be said. During this time, the examination is interrupted and resumed 20 minutes later. Religious holidays for Hindus² and Muslims are accommodated within the academic calendar.

Changes have occurred in the way we approach cultural difference and how we teach with those differences in mind. It is hoped that the positive examples cited above is testimony to endeavours to take culture into account within our curriculum. Canada is perhaps a good example of a country where different cultures co-exist in a bilingual setting. It is the ideal place for people from around the world to get together and to discuss their approaches to culture. Globalization has brought us closer together in many ways, but it has also exacerbated perceived differences between peoples. Organizations such as the IALS are perfect platforms to further engage other people and learn from their experiences.

² South Africa has the largest expatriate Indian community outside of India.