Promoting Cultural Diversity in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper, first, looks into what cultural diversity in higher education is. Secondly, it offers speculations on different attitudes of educators and students to multiculturalism because of certain myths that are also described and dispelled. Thirdly, the author dwells on types of programs that may help maintain cultural diversity in universities. Finally, the author focuses on the contribution of the National Research University "Higher School of Economics" (HSE) to promoting multiculturalism, mostly on arranging international online forums to bring two and more cultures together. When analyzing the forum content, communication strategies used by the students were determined and described.

Key words: cultural diversity, multiculturalism, intercultural education, higher education,

Introduction

In the United States of America the concept of multicultural education originated in the 1960s in the wake of the civil rights movement as a corrective to the long-standing policy of assimilating minority groups into the "melting pot" of dominant American culture (Sobol, 1990).

But America is not the only country that is facing the issue of cultural diversity and the need to raise people's awareness of it.

Migration and interracial marriages contribute to the increasing complexity of the shape of society in any country, especially in those that used to be multinational in the past (for example, Russia has to deal with the Soviet heritage). Undoubtedly, the demographic changes will require some shifts in how we educate younger generations. Besides, we are becoming more aware of other cultures as technology brings the global community into our homes.

National and international concern about changing demographics, inequities in the distribution of educational resources, and continuing underachievement for some students has stirred renewed interest in the quality and organization of instruction for students in educational institutions (Ball, 2009).

The issue of multicultural education can be studied in two ways: (1) the challenge of dealing with students with different cultural backgrounds in one classroom, and (2) the challenge of bringing two or more cultures together through joint international (academic) projects.

Defining cultural diversity

But before we look into each of these questions, let us define the term "cultural diversity" as it has gone tremendous transformations itself. A couple of decades ago this term was regarded as a politically correct word for

"race/ethnicity". Nowadays, it has broadened its meaning. Here are some definitions of it. Cultural diversity is (1) the variety of human societies or cultures in a specific region, or in the world as a whole; (2) variety or multiformity of human social structures, belief systems, and strategies for adapting to situations in different parts of the world; (3) differences in race, ethnicity, language, nationality, religion, etc. among various groups within a community.

Cultural diversity is not limited only to race or ethnicity, it includes other factors and it is important for educators to understand what has an impact in their environment as in many cases race may not be the issue but what does matter is the country of origin, the parents' educational level, or the socioeconomic status of a child.

The word "diversity" has a connotation of "division" and some scholars argue that multicultural education threatens to divide students along racial and cultural lines, rather than unite them. It is believed that strong attachments to ethnic, racial, religious, and other identity groups lead to conflicts and harmful divisions within society. But the act of drawing people together and trying to unify their myriad cultures may (and does) create a sense of "university" (Milligan, n.d.).

The attitude to multiculturalism in education

The attitude to multiculturalism in the learning process varies.

It may be categorized into the following four groups: (1) negative; (2) null; (3) contributing and (4) transformational. Some ideas offered below were borrowed from the article "Student Organizations and Institutional Diversity Efforts: a Typology" (Kuk & Banning, 2010).

Negative relationships may be further subdivided into willful negative and negligent negative.

A willful negative relationship occurs when students are consciously motivated through personal or organizational values, a policy or behavioural act to bring harm to members of non-dominant culture. It may result in an act of violence. The reasons for this behavior are either xenophobia (the fear of foreigners) or the belief in the superiority of their own culture.

A negligent negative relationship happens when the behavior is not conscious or motivated. Still, its results may be disruptive though the reason for it is negligence.

Corrective measures in both cases will differ not in the content but in scale, intensity and length.

A null relationship is characterized by doing nothing to support multicultural goals of the institution. In this case students believe that doing nothing is not negative. True. But it is not positive either as the monocultural education will not change unless there are motivated positive efforts.

Unwillingness of educators to deal with diversity is connected with a strong belief that heterogeneity and diversity are a learning problem and a prejudice of the pedagogical value of homogeneity as a learning facilitating context. The increasing mobility of young people guarantees the largest inflow of students from diverse

backgrounds in universities all over the world and teachers feel underprepared to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students. One factor that contributes to the reluctance to accept them is the absence of connection between the backgrounds of the students and the teachers who teach them.

A contributing relationship suggests that students support some multicultural events in the educational institution, for example, celebrating holidays that exist in other cultures. It focuses on cultural events that are typically acceptable by the dominant culture or it may include organizational efforts to address diversity activities more associated with the organization's goals by adding cultural content, concepts and themes without changing basic structures.

A transformational relationship means recognizing the need to support multicultural goals of the institution, thus taking deliberate actions to solve, to promote and enhance them.

Defining intercultural education

Bringing multiculturalism into education creates intercultural educational environment. What is meant by "intercultural education"? Fernand Ouellet (1991; as cited in Martins, 2008) defines it in the following way: (1) better understanding of other cultures in modern societies; (2) better communication skills between people from different cultures; (3) more adequate attitude in the context of cultural diversity and understanding of psycho-social mechanisms that create racism; (4) ability to participate in social interaction, developing a sense of identity and common belonging to humanity.

Myths about multiculturalism

Introducing multiculturalism brings about change which causes uncertainty and eventually fear, that is why this process may be resisted both at educators' and students' levels. The unwillingness to embrace multiculturalism is also connected with stereotypes and certain myths associated with it. Let us dispel some of them.

Myth 1: "there should be a separate curriculum for multicultural education". The world is composed of so many cultures that it is impossible to teach about all of them. It is essential to make sure that by learning to understand and value their own culture students learn to understand and appreciate other cultures in the process. The curriculum should promote recognition, understanding and acceptance of cultural diversity (Gomez, 1991).

Myth 2: "multicultural education is only about changing the curriculum". Marginalized racial, ethnic, and language groups have demanded that institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities respond to the groups' cultural identities and experiences by reforming curricula to reflect their struggles, hopes, dreams, and possibilities (Gordon, 2001; Nieto, 1999).

Some scholars (Nieto, 1992; Burnett, 1994) assert that multicultural education can have an impact on every aspect of the operation of an educational institution: staffing, curriculum, tracking, testing, teaching, disciplinary policies,

student involvement, parent and community involvement. For example, universities may have to modify teaching strategies to make them more culturally responsive to students from different racial, ethnic, cultural, and language groups (Au, 2006; Gay, 2000; Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005).

Myth 3: "other cultures should be presented as opposed to the dominant culture (emphasis on differences rather than similarities)". In this case students will feel either superior or inferior to the cultures studied. This approach does not promote cooperation within culturally diverse class, it enhances the feeling of fear and hostility. The teaching should be based on finding both differences *and* similarities (to suggest that we may share certain values or habits) and on instilling respect for other cultures.

Myth 4: "multicultural education is relevant only in classes with students who are members of the cultural and racial groups to be studied". As it was already said, our world is multicultural and students must experience the diversity outside their immediate environment (Gomez, 1991). Exposing students to many languages, cultures and people prepares them for a world that is becoming more diverse every day.

The first step to integrating the diverse cultures of students in the classroom and curriculum is to acknowledge one's own prejudices, assumptions and stereotypes and for educators to recognize the beliefs, values and behaviours that characterize the various cultures of their students.

Programs promoting multiculturalism in education

Gary Burnett (1994) differentiates three groups of programs that educators may incorporate into the learning process. They are

Content-oriented programs
Their primary goal is to include aspects of their experiences, cultures, and languages about different cultural groups into the curriculum and educational materials in order to enrich students' knowledge about these groups (Burnett, 1994) and the mainstream culture as well as help marginalized groups to experience civic equality and recognition (Gutmann, 2004). In its simplest form this program means adding short readings or in-class celebrations of cultural holidays. A more profound approach suggests developing multicultural content throughout the disciplines; incorporating a range of different viewpoints and perspectives in the curriculum; transforming the paradigm, thus, working out a new one for the curriculum (Burnett, 1994).

Besides, students are a valuable source for information about their culture, too. Thus, by including people from various cultural backgrounds (for example, by encouraging students to talk about themselves and their family and arranging the learning process around their cultures as well as their own) educators will encourage the exchange of knowledge and best practices, enriching the learning experience of all their students and boost the self-esteem of an individual student.

Student-oriented programs

Throughout human history language and society have always been deeply intertwined. Without a language as the basis for communication, no society can function (Banks, 2002).

In many countries, many of which are officially monolingual, there are immigrants and refugees from all over the world who have to be integrated into society. Often they are expected to adopt the dominant language, while their own minority language is given a low status (Biseth, 2009).

Minority students usually face challenges connected with their poor knowledge of the language of the dominant culture. But their academic failures can be attributed to them being somewhat "deficient" as they do not fit the system. Quite the opposite: "educators must find where the system is deficient to meet the need of these students" (Trail, 2000).

Such programs are intended to improve the academic achievement of minority students, even when they do not involve extensive changes in the content of the curriculum (Banks, 1994). They are designed to help culturally and/or linguistically different students join the educational mainstream. Thus, they may be viewed as compensatory in nature and sometimes are not distinguished from other compensatory programs that may not be multicultural in themselves (Burnett, 1994).

These programs may be directed at researching the culturally-based learning styles so that to choose the appropriate teaching style or improving the language skills of culturally different students who are usually bilinguals.

Socially-oriented programs

In short, such programs combine the two approaches described above: they seek to revise the curriculum in order to emphasize positive social contributions of ethnic and cultural groups and to determine the learning styles to enhance students' academic achievement. In their sophisticated form these programs should promote all kinds of contact among the races.

One of the ways to do that is to increase the pool of minority teachers. They can act as "cultural mediators connecting more immediately with students who might otherwise disengage" (Trail, 2000).

Another way is to arrange joint international projects. The process of globalization, facilitated by the rapid development of new information and communication technologies, creates the conditions for renewed dialogue among cultures. Thus, educators should encourage "digital literacy" and better mastery of the new information and communication technologies that must be regarded both as an educational discipline and as a teaching tool to enhance the effectiveness of the educational process.

HSE ("Higher School of Economics") contribution to promoting cultural diversity

In the National Research University HSE ("Higher School of Economics"), which is aimed at being known and recognized on the international educational arena, fostering and maintaining multicultural relationships is of great importance. Students are educated to regard multilingualism not seen as a problem but as a resource.

First, HSE attracts professors from all over the world: either to work on a regular basis or as a visiting (guest) lecturer. Not only did it enhance students' language skills but, primarily, it broadens their mind as they are exposed to multiple perceptions and opinions in the field of their expertise. The drawback of the Soviet schooling system was the dissemination of only one way of thinking, no other points of view were accepted or even made known to the public. This way of teaching was discarded together with the collapse of the USSR.

Second, it welcomes students from various ethnic backgrounds. For example, according to the 2010 statistical data, the Moscow branch of HSE educates people from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, South Ossetia, Tadzhikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Ukraine and western countries (Austria, Bulgaria, China, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain, Turkey, the USA). Some foreigners also study in the Saint Petersburg and Nizhniy Novgorod branches. The franca lingua in this case is usually English, sometimes Russian.

The presence of people belonging to different religious, racial or ethnic groups in class is challenging not only linguistically but also conceptually. International classrooms create conditions in which students from different groups can interact in ways that enable them to view events from diverse perspectives and to interact in equal-status situations. Students will learn to see each issue as a multi-faceted one, to be open for other options, to consider all the alternatives before making the final decision. The main problem is not to overstep the boundary and not to accidentally incite racial or religious hatred that is why each interracial interaction must be deliberately structured by teachers otherwise racial and ethnic conflict can erupt and stereotyping may persist.

The student club that is responsible for cultural education and recreation activities sees to it that the interests of ethnic and religious minorities are met. It arranges performances based on the world literature masterpieces (not only by western authors) and in different languages. These performances are free of charge and anyone interested can attend them. The club also holds thematic evenings to help people know certain cultures, their heritage and achievements, their way of life in general. But the attendance is voluntary which means that if you are not keen on learning something about another culture, you will still persist in your ignorance by not coming to this event. Low attendance can also be explained by a huge workload that HSE students experience.

Third, students are encouraged and given opportunities to participate in various projects that may include international students. These projects may involve personal contact among participants (for example, HSE arranges international summer schools) or virtual conversations over the Internet.

The idea of an Internet-based forum used for educational purposes was offered by Professor Gary Scudder (Champlain College, Vermont, the USA): two groups of students across the seas get together to discuss an issue chosen for them by their professors. It was called Global Modules (for further use – GMs). The site is www.globalmodules.net.

So far HSE is a partner of Champlain College which means that Russian students are matched to American students only. But the forum allows casual conversation to take place in a so-called "Coffee Shop" where students from all over the world may communicate on various topics.

The project usually lasts four weeks: (1) introductions and perceptions; (2) obligatory reading of a certain fragment on the topic or watching a topic-related video and then answering the questions; (3) the continuation of the discussion focusing on some particular issues and (4) conclusions and saying good-byes.

The advantages of GMs are the following: (1) Students are brought into contact with members of other cultures and, thus, they get new or additional knowledge about them; (2) They learn to respect them and work cooperatively with them; (3) They do it at their own pace as it is an extra-curriculum activity; (4) They get a better understanding of the topic under discussion. Thus, it helps them grasp the material of the course better. Besides, they do it in an interactive way without much of drilling; (5) Besides, the topic, offered in the forum, is study-related and by moving the discussion online we provide conditions for students to do it at length, without spending much time on it in the classroom.

Another feature that seems attractive for students is the opportunity to talk to their peers in a relatively casual situation.

Some students feel more comfortable with this project as the ability to think over their answers or comments and to check them for mistakes with others including the professor relieves them of the stress that they may be subjected to in class.

The participation in this project is voluntary for Russian students but this time they are eager to take part in it as they are more globally-minded and open for challenge, they appreciate the opportunity to express their point of view that will be taken into consideration when making conclusions.

They are more enthusiastic to complete the task offered in the forum as in this way they help people of other nationality to get a better understanding of their culture. To answer questions correctly and explicitly, students need to search for additional information in various sources that must be first assessed for their reliability. Thus, students get to know their culture better and they learn to support their point of view by providing experts' opinions or statistical data.

For example, one of the forums was arranged around the topic of using Internet technologies when electioneering. Here are some of the questions asked: (1) Is the Internet widely used for political campaigns in your country? (2) What kind of Internet activity prevails (sites, blogs, videos, press releases, direct mail, etc.)? (3) Are personal sites of candidates interactive? (4) Is there any bias in providing information on websites of politicians? (5) Do websites of politicians provide a two-way communication?

To answer these questions, students analysed the sites of their politicians, particularly, of their Presidents.

When answering the questions about the preferences of different people (senior people vs. young ones, men vs. women), students provided statistical data.

Task questions can also be aimed at self-knowledge.

For example, another forum was devoted to work-life balance. Students were asked to analyze their time management, anger management and stress management skills and to offer their pieces of advice and to share their ways of coping with these problems (time squeeze and deadlines, anger and stressful situations).

In the fourth week students are to summarize what has been said and to come to certain conclusions. For example, in the forum about electioneering students found out that (1) Russian students are not so politically active as American ones; and (2) Russian students do not welcome the usage of Internet technologies when campaigning as there is a chance that the coverage of the events will be biased or distorted while American students believe that introducing Internet technologies into the electioneering process will create a more responsible electorate.

Another finding was of a more personal value: American students are more prone to ask questions while Russian students are keen on answering them.

For the research we have chosen two forums on electioneering (February, 2010 and February, 2011) and two forums on work-life balance (March-April, 2010 and February, 2011).

The objective of the research was to study the students' communication strategies as they may help to determine their personal and educational priorities. These strategies may also reflect the students' learning styles which is essential for professors to know in order to adjust their teaching style accordingly.

The methods used are quantitative and qualitative: content analysis, the study of the structure of posts, the analysis of a student's behavior in the classroom and in the online forum, and questionnaires or interviews. Content analysis and the study of the structure of posts are applied to come up with a number of communication strategies developed by the students. The analysis of a student's behavior in and out of the classroom suggests the most comfortable way for this student to interact with the environment. Thus, the results will influence the choice between a questionnaire and an interview for further research. The last two are crucial for verifying the findings as well as for checking whether the goals set by the professor before the project were achieved and for feedback from the students on advantages and disadvantages of the conducted discussion.

As a result, we have found the following communication strategies: bonding (establishing a tie with one person only, posts are rarely related to the topic), networking (establishing as many contacts as possible, posts can contain both answers to the questions of the discussion and personal information), a formal approach (providing short answers to all the questions offered for discussion), a selective approach (answering one or two questions, the posts are usually not very

informative and contain a lot of personal anecdotes) and challenging (offering a controversial opinion or asking a provocative question).

All the students appreciated the opportunity to interact with culturally different people but, in the first run (February, 2010), few of them regarded this forum as an extension of the course: mostly they viewed it as something done for fun rather than for educational purposes. Fortunately, the next time (March-April, 2010) this attitude changed due to the loss of novelty and extensive talks about web-enhanced learning, the project being a part of it.

Conclusion

To conclude, there are several ways of bringing multiculturalism into the educational process: (1) inviting foreign professors to teach; (2) welcoming foreign students into your classroom; (3) organizing cultural events and celebrations around certain cultures; (4) holding international (summer) schools and (5) arranging online discussion among students from all over the world.

The goal of multicultural education is not only to teach children about other groups or countries. It is also to help children become accustomed to the idea that there are many lifestyles, languages, cultures, and points of view. The purpose of multicultural curriculum is to attach positive feelings to multicultural experiences so that each child will feel included and valued, and will feel friendly and respectful toward people from other ethnic and cultural groups (Dimidjian, 1989).

In the conclusion, let me quote the *UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2001): "respect for the diversity of cultures, tolerance, dialogue and cooperation, in a climate of mutual trust and understanding are among the best guarantees of international peace and security.

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