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The Intercultural Approach to VET Teaching and Learning

Introduction

There were 171,237 international student enrolments in the VET sector towards the end of 2011 (AEI, 2012). Students from the Asian region constitute 85% of international VET students. This paper focuses on how VET teachers have adopted the intercultural approach to teaching international students and indeed all VET learners. The intercultural approach can manifest in the ways teachers design activities to provide international students with opportunities to validate their understanding of the vocational practices in their home countries and integrate this source of knowledge into teaching and learning. Another dimension of the intercultural approach is related to how teachers can draw on different strategies to foster the interaction between international and domestic students and support their development of intercultural competence. In light of the intercultural approach, students are enabled to develop their comparative and reflective perspective on the different vocational practices as well as language and cultural differences. The development of these important attributes and skills is integral for students to engage with the highly interconnected cultural contexts with which they interact during their study and perhaps find themselves in their future workplaces (Hiller & Wozniak, 2009).

The increasing diversity of the student population in all educational sectors has led to growing research on intercultural teaching and learning (Volet and Pears, 1994; Biggs, 2001; De Vita, 2005; Doherty and Singh, 2005; Chang, 2006; Ippolito, 2007; Gesche & Makeham, 2008; Hellsten, 2008; Hirst & Brown, 2008; Leask, 2009; Bennett, 2009; Singh & Han, 2010; Tran, 2010). Intercultural teaching is interrelated to intercultural learning which provides students the opportunity to develop a capacity to operate sensitively and competently across cultural contexts (Bennett, 2009:2). Research indicates that an important aspect of the intercultural approach is linked to teachers' efforts in understanding the learning characteristics and needs of students from diverse backgrounds and developing culturally inclusive practices that accommodate the diversity of the student body (Biggs, 2001, Doherty and Singh, 2005; Volet and Pears, 1994). Other scholars argue for the need to foster the interaction of students from multicultural backgrounds and assist them with the development of intercultural sensitivity and competence (De Vita, 2005; Ippolito; Hellsten, 2008). The embrace and integration of knowledge and skills that students from diverse background possess into teaching and learning to enable the whole class the access to alternative professional practices and perspectives in different countries is another emergent theme in the wave of research on intercultural teaching (Chang, 2006; Singh & Shrestha, 2008; Tran, 2010; Singh & Han, 2010). Thus, in adopting intercultural approach to teaching, teachers indeed engage with and exhibit inclusivity and diversity principles, learner-centred philosophy and productive and transformative pedagogies.

Within the VET teaching and learning context, competency-based training and training packages are mandatory. Training packages prescribe the competency or the skills, knowledge and attributes required for effective performance in the workplace.
and thus entail a competency-based qualifications framework and assessment guidelines (Guthrie 2009). The focus of competency based training and training packages on specific industry-defined competencies has led VET educators to place much emphasis on performance or ‘doing’ rather than underpinning knowledge (Smith, 2010; Wheelahan, 2010). The knowledge classified in training packages is derived from workplaces rather than disciplinary systems of meaning (Wheelahan, 2010, 2008). In other words, training packages shape the VET curriculum and pedagogy in the manner that it aims to provide students with ‘access to knowledge in its particularised form’ but not with ‘the means to relate it to its general and principled structure and system of meaning’ (2008:4). Wheelahan challenges the principle underpinning CBT because it assumes that ‘outcomes can be achieved by teaching to the outcomes directly and in doing so ignores the complexity that is needed to create capacity which go beyond the level of experience in the contextual and situated’ (2010:138). Furthermore, in a recent review of twenty years of competency-based training in VET, Smith (2010) pointed out that VET teachers have learnt to passively accept CBT and training packages rather than engaging critically with pedagogical issues that are key to their delivery of training packages (p.62). The need to demonstrate compliance and the auditing culture seem to be a constraint for teachers’ active and critical focus on pedagogical review and innovation (Guthrie, 2008; Smith, 2010). In addition, the complexity of units of competency makes it challenging for teachers to deliver them and this situation clearly prevents teachers from transforming VET pedagogy (Smith, 2010).

The study

This paper draws on a larger study involving 150 interviews with international students, VET teachers, student coordinators and managers from 25 VET institutes in Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales. The research is funded by the Australian Research Council under the Discovery Grant Scheme. The teachers who participated in this study were from a range of fields including cookery, hairdressing, hospitality management, law, finance, accounting, building and carpentry. Semi-structured interviews with open ended questions were undertaken with the teacher respondents during 2010 and 2011. The interviews aimed to document teachers’ perspectives on the relevance of competency-based training in teaching international students and how they have adapted their teaching content and pedagogy to address the learning characteristics of international students. This paper focuses only on the emergence of the intercultural approach that teacher respondents have adopted in teaching VET students whilst the suitability of competency-based training to teaching international students is addressed in another paper arising from this research.

The author has also maintained email and telephone dialogues with a number of staff respondents and subsequently held informal meetings with some teachers to clarify issues that remained unclear during the first interviews. Ethics approval was sought prior to data collection from the University Human Research Ethics Committee where the author is based. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, their names and institutes are kept anonymous. The face to face interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and then analysed using a thematic analysis approach. The analysis was inductive and aimed to identify emergent themes and patterns.
Enhancing awareness and knowledge of international students’ backgrounds and cultural learning characteristics

The intercultural approach involves teachers’ researching and learning to be familiar with not only the educational and cultural background of international students but also the broader society where they are from. It is important for teachers to embed knowledge of students’ cultural backgrounds in course design and link these sources of knowledge to the content of teaching and learning. In this sense, intercultural pedagogy exposes international and local students alike to international practices and knowledge within the classroom context. Such a development of knowledge, skills and attributes is indeed integral for enhancing students’ capacity to adapt to different workplaces and diverse work practices as well as career mobility. As Training Packages have been criticized for privileging technical skills and does not adequately focus on developing learners’ capacity to adapt prescribed competencies in new and diverse workplace contexts (Boud & Hawke, 2003), the intercultural approach is needed to prepare learners for more adaptive and engaged workforce.

Insights from teachers
The following examples indicate how teachers in different VET programs have actively sought to enhance their understandings of international students’ cultural socio backgrounds and incorporated into the content of the course

I learn to be familiar with the society where the group come from and to link back into those societies as best I can to at least hook on what they know from home into what they will have to learn here or what system they’ll be operating in. I like to know what's happening in India, Korea, China, the Philippines. I find international students are very pleased if you can say, well, that's not how the courts work in Korea, they work in this way. Here we work this way because this is a British heritage country. And they're often quite stunned that you know something about the legal and political framework in the country from which they come. (Law, TAFE, NSW)

When I’m delivering a particular competency, perhaps I should familiarise myself with how it’s done in another country and then give an analysis and say, well we do it in Australia this way. This is how it might be adapted from your country. So there’s context, not to then therefore pass judgement as to which one’s more appropriate but to say how one is applied in the other context. So I think it’s crucial in teaching practice that you, I think it goes beyond respecting and recognising diversity but actually contributing to diversity by saying, I may not be Chinese or I may not be Vietnamese or I may not be Indian, but I’ve taken my time to at least familiarise myself with the practices in different countries (Hospitality Management, Private college, VIC).

As illustrated in the above examples, teachers’ effort to integrate the background knowledge of international students’ home countries into the curriculum is invaluable. First of all this assists with engaging international students in the classroom activities because they feel they are learning something relevant to their home countries and thus feel included in the learning process. This reflects the primary principle of the
inclusive practice in international education (Tran, 2010). Once students see what is connected and meaningful to them is indeed valued in the curriculum, they often feel more intrinsically motivated to learn. Secondly embracing both general knowledge and specific examples from students’ home countries offers students the opportunity to capitalise on the resources they bring along to the Australian classroom and on their experiences and understandings of the vocational knowledge distinctive of their home countries. Thirdly such an incorporation of knowledge from a wide range of countries fosters the conditions for comparative studies and critical reflection. The intercultural approach opens up the opportunities for both international and local students as well as teachers to discuss and compare how things can be practised differently in different national, political and socio-cultural contexts, the reasons underpinning these variations and draw useful implications for changing workplace contexts.

Teachers may be engaged in simple research to gain deeper understandings of students’ learning needs and make informed decisions about teaching practices based on such knowledge.

**Insights from teachers:**

I did the research and as a result of that I worked out it’s a cultural situation and part of your classes as well, certainly helped me with that. It’s a cultural issue where the students don’t want to have the teacher lose face if they have problems. They don’t want to lose face themselves if they give a wrong response without having the proper time to interpret what’s being said and then perhaps give an informed response. So how I structured my lessons from that point on was I would deliberate a particular unit and then the next week rather than asking questions about that unit on that week I would ask questions about the previous week. But through my own research I’ve now learnt that if I deliver something and I ask them the questions the following session that I have a far greater response. So it gives them time, I suppose to digest it but there's also some cultural issues in there as well. (Management, TAFE, VIC)

During the interview, the teacher many times conveyed his disappointment at being thrown into teaching stand-alone classes of international students without receiving sufficient institutional support and being provided with the proper grounding, training and understandings of international students’ needs. He tried to seek advice from his colleagues who are more experienced in working with students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless it seems that other teachers in his Department are also confused and ambiguous about the effective ways to engage students in the classroom. The teacher initially drew on the principle that learning and the acquisition of new knowledge happens through questioning, exploring and interacting with other class members. Such a principle underpinning pedagogical practices is privileged in the ‘West’ (Watkins, 2000). However his attempt to encourage students to pose questions to students and be engaged in class discussions as a way to interpret new concepts and construct knowledge seems to fail. The teacher has stepped beyond his own comfort zone. He conducted a small survey of his own students and attempted to understand their previous educational background, learning styles, educational expectations and cultural issues such as face saving. Based on increased understandings of his students’ cultural learning styles, the teacher adjusted his pedagogy by allowing his students more time to digest the new concepts at home.
before requesting them to critically discuss these concepts in class. This is in line with
the Confucian approach to knowledge construction. Baker (2002:181) asserts that
learning (xue) comes first and questioning or thinking (si) comes second in Chinese
traditional order of approaching knowledge. That is, questioning and discussion can
only come after the learners have acquired and mastered new knowledge or concepts
(Watkins, 2000). In other words, Biggs (1996:55) argues ‘In the west we believe in
exploring first, then in the development of skill; the Chinese believe in skill
development first, which typically involves repetitive, as apposed to rote learning,
after which there is something to be creative with’.

Though getting to know the learning traditions of every student from different cultural
backgrounds has been seen as being impractical (Biggs, 2001), teachers can conduct a
simple survey with students. This helps to provide teachers with an overview of the
cultural and personal issues that may support or hinder their engagement in learning.
Importantly improved teaching and learning can be achieved based on an
understanding of distinctive cultural issues that might remain unrecognised without
the teacher’s inquiry. In terms of pedagogical development, the teacher above
exemplifies how he moves from a stage of ignorance to awareness building and then
to pedagogical adaptation. He was ignorant of what may hinder international students’
integration into classroom activities. He completed his own inquiry to investigate the
reasons shaping the lack of engagement. Finally based on such understandings, he
restructured the lessons and adjusted the practices to avoid making his students feel
losing face, and thus enhanced their engagement.

Designing and structuring activities that require students to build on their cultural experiences
An integral part of the intercultural pedagogic approach is to design and structure
tasks that require students to draw on their home country context and contextualize
the theories based on these contexts. These activities not only promote mutual
recognition of the divergent vocational practices in different countries but also
involve students in taking control of the learning process. This approach has been
seen as invaluable as ‘having international search for evidence or concepts from their
homelands takes all students beyond a nation-centred parochial education to engage
them in producing international perspectives’ (Singh & Shrestha, 2008:77). In
engaging international students in such an international pedagogy, teachers move
beyond viewing international students as being deficit or empty vessels to be filled
with Australian practices to seeing them as being capable to navigate vocational
knowledge and add alternative, international and fresh perspectives to the teaching
and learning process based on their understandings of their homeland contexts and
their reflective capacity. This approach encourages students to actively involve in the
learning process and creates some space to exercise their autonomy as a learner.
Valuing international students themselves and their knowledge resources is indeed
opening up the collective intellectual venues to enrich and extend locally-situated
theories and practices in the vocational fields.

Insights from teachers
Teachers were doing things around like how we’re learning about business
practices here in Australia, can you do a presentation on how it is in China
(Program Manager, TAFE, VIC).
Oh, I try to get them to tell me, well, how do you do it in your country?... Our timber frame, this is all unknown to them because there are no timber frame buildings there. Most of them are brick or solid walls of some sort, mud. I try to relate what we’re doing back to what they explain that they do in their country and then show them the differences. (Building, TAFE, VIC)

The students might be asked to pick a country - Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam - and told, okay, your clients wants you to sell this product that's unique for this particular country, say to a different audience than that you have a different target audience. (Finance, TAFE, VIC)

So I think maybe like an international day or something like that, where we have the same topic but different approaches. Maybe people from Vietnam will do it this way. If you come from England, we'll do it this way. So you sort of, or rather let the students be a trainer for a day and then, see in my home country, this is how we do it. And then everyone learns. (Hairdressing, private college, VIC)

Teaching can indeed contribute to making trans-national intellectual and skills connections through the ways international students are positioned not only as cultural resources but also as intellectual and skills resources. This approach to teaching recognizes the cultural values, skills, knowledge and prior experiences of international students as the strengths in the new learning context. More importantly adopting this approach teachers tend to acknowledges that there are different ways of doing things in different countries and capitalizing on such knowledge to enhance students’ collective understandings of alternative practices. Such an attitude from the teacher may have a positive impact on learners’ professional mindset and ability to recognize, value and adapt to different practices. Figgis (2009) argues that this approach indicates the respect that trainers have for their learners. Apparently when teachers exemplify this attitude to their students in their course and raise their awareness of each other’s existing strengths, both international and domestic students can feel more motivated to integrate with each other and in particular this approach makes explicit to local students the values brought by international students, which is often seen as a challenging task for teachers. Engaging with transnational intellectual connections through such productive pedagogies (Singh & Han, 2010), both international and domestic students can be more respectful of each other’s cultural difference and intellectual strengths rather than international students feeling ignored and marginalised for not sharing the Australian contextual knowledge privileged in the classroom. They can see the benefit of shared learning from a variety of resources in enhancing their vocational skills and knowledge and broadening their views about international practices. Importantly, such pedagogies that draw on the validation of multiple values may foster ‘the desire to learn form difference in a way that will lead to improvement of practice’ (Walker and Walker, 1998:2).

Pedagogy that focuses on critically validating international students’ intellectual resources opens up the possibility for students themselves to engage in the process of construing and re-construing their own experiences and existing knowledge. This approach is empowering for international students because they see themselves as
playing a role in enriching the knowledge and skill formation of those involved in the learning process. This in turn assists with the engagement and nurtures the interest in learning. Thus in addition to engaging students through productive pedagogies, the intercultural approach demonstrates features of inclusive and empowering pedagogies. In this sense, VET pedagogy extends the scope of student-centeredness beyond simply making students feel respected and accommodating students’ learning needs (Knowles, 1990) to situating and validating their experiential and scholastic knowledge through the VET program and enriching vocational knowledge through making trans-national intellectual connections.

Fostering engagement between international students and local students

One of the primary principles of intercultural pedagogy is to draw on different strategies to foster the interaction and engagement of the diverse student cohort and facilitate their development of intercultural competence.

Insights from teachers

One of them was an exercise in discussing their backgrounds and matching up a local student with an international… And we did a plenary after that and just did a brief statement around the whole room so that everyone could share in some of what was happening and we found it was quite illuminating to see that that really worked. It was a great experience. (Cookery, TAFE, VIC)

One of the exercises we did was communicate in the workplace. So I asked for volunteers and they had to speak their language. So I’d speak to them in English and they had to answer in their language. And the group had to try and figure out from their body language and tone of voice what they were actually saying to me. And then we did another little group activity where we got an Indian student and an Asian student to try and speak to each other and they both had to speak just their language, but with body language try and communicate. And it was hilarious it broke the barrier a bit and they got to realise how difficult it is for each other… But what I try and make them understand that part of the reason we’re doing that, not in English, is because it’s like excluding the local students and it’s making them look like foreigners and to understand the challenge. So it was like a really good ice breaker. (Hairdressing, Private college, VIC).

Teachers may draw on different ice-breaking approaches to facilitate the engagement of students from diverse backgrounds and local students and assist them with the development intercultural sensitivity and competence. These activities demonstrated by the teachers above are invaluable for students to learn about cultural and language differences in order to enrich their cultural understandings and educate themselves to appreciate others. A more positive perspective of diversity can be achieved if local students are engaged in activities when they are asked to imagine themselves to be speaking another language. That is, they are placed in the position of trying to interpret what it is like to be as ‘others’ with another language and set of cultural norms settling in a new learning environment and in a foreign country. Efforts in
imaging themselves to be ‘others’ and gaining ‘insider’ perspectives can provide students with some hints for interpretation about the challenges facing international students as well as their strengths. If critical reflection is facilitated after the experience, the activity may raise students’ awareness of their own ethnocentricity and how this might affect the ways they view students from other ethnic and language backgrounds. Such linguistic and cultural contrasts to which the class is exposed may generate not only an appreciation of diversity but also interests that may stimulate learners’ minds and provoke new thoughts in engaging with diversity (Chang, 2006). These intercultural approaches assist with the development of learners’ recognition of difference and others’ languages and cultural worldviews. In particular, these approaches move beyond merely learning about cultural differences which may not lead to significant changes in their perspectives. Rather these enable students to be actually engaged in intercultural activities and experience the ‘real’ moments of intercultural situations that can stimulate reflection and positive changes.

**Teachers’ cultural sensitivity and awareness of cultural difference**

In order to teach international students effectively teachers need to enter the class with an open mind and a willingness to understand and appreciate cultural differences. In addition to cultural differences in relation to teaching and learning such as cultural learning characteristics and learning needs, expectations of teaching, learning and the outcomes of learning and learning attitudes, other dimensions of cultural differences such as dietary needs, religions and behaviours need to be taken into account too. This is because these dimensions are interrelated to learning.

**Insights from teachers**

And as a teacher, you also need to be able to understand the cultural differences, particularly with things like special dietary needs, and particularly if you're making products that may be also sensitive that you don't demand someone use it because it may be against their religion. I think that you need to understand. If you went in with a very closed mind and thought, I'm going to treat them all the same, I don't think you'd be able to do that. I think you'd have more problems than if you went in there with an open mind and say, tell me about your country, tell me about your religion. I think you have to be able to understand your learning process too. It's not right or wrong. It doesn't really matter. (Bakery, TAFE, VIC)

Yeah, look, what you learn from them is the way to teach because and they are very different. With some students you can be forceful, you can joke with them and they can understand what you're joking about. The way you use your words is very important because some of them may easily get offended or not understand your humour so you need to be very careful with that. I’m very conscious of that and the only way you find out about that is by talking to them. Some students are very reserved, some are very extroverted. Some of the European students are very touchy-feely, I’ll give you a hug. Whereas other students don’t like that closeness and things like that so you need to be aware of all those sort of aspects. (Cookery, Private college, VIC)
The mentality ‘I am going to treat them all the same’ may be problematic because this can be associated with an ignorance of cultural differences or lack of the willingness to understand cultural differences. Whilst there is an assumption that treating all international and domestic students the same is an approach that ensures equity, this has been categorized as a minimisation approach by which difference is trivialised (Bennette, 1993). In light of Bennette’s principle, this stage is criticized to be ‘alluring’ as similarity seems more profound than difference and the distinctive needs and learning characteristics of students from different ethnic backgrounds are not taken into consideration in informing the teaching and learning process.

Conclusion

The presence of international students in their classroom has placed VET teachers in the position to transform their pedagogical practices in order to cater more effectively for this student cohort. The intercultural approach is indeed the outcome of the process of adapting pedagogy. An important dimension of this approach is embedded in the ways teachers make an attempt to search for information related to their international students’ home and industry practices in different countries, their cultural learning characteristics and different cultural dimensions and adapt their reaching based on their increased understandings. This process has the invaluable implication beyond the teaching the international and local students to include professional advancement of teachers themselves. Researching effective pedagogic practices to address the learning needs and characteristics of international students is thus intimately associated with the process of broadening teachers’ professional horizons and enriching their own intercultural experiences. Importantly in internationalizing the content of teaching and adopting the intercultural pedagogic approach, VET teachers indeed reconstruct international students not only as valued members in the class but also as global mobile citizens who are trained and empowered to be capable to work across national borders.

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