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Exploring Intercultural Competence: A Service-Learning Approach

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Abstract: This study explored the developing intercultural competence of fourth-year Australian education pre-service teachers through a core unit of study on inclusive education, following a service-learning pathway. The Australian pre-service teachers volunteered to be 'of service' to a cohort of second-year Malaysian pre-service teachers studying in Australia in a transnational twinning program. Students participated in a Patches program which included writing 'patches' (reflections) and engaging in social exchanges. Data were gathered from focus group interviews, written reflection logs and Patches writing books and were analysed through Butin's (2005) four-lenses of service-learning: technical, cultural, political and post-modern lenses. Data revealed that initially the Australian pre-service teachers felt their presumptions about interacting with non-Australian students challenged but by the end of the semester embraced the basic tenants of inclusion and were able to project how they could take their new understandings into the classroom as inclusive teachers.

Introduction

This paper presents findings from a Service-learning program evaluated through Butin's (2005a) four-lenses of Service-learning. The core activities comprising the program were designed to develop the intercultural competencies of Australian and Malaysian pre-service teachers. The students who are the focus of this paper were fourth-year education students from Australia who chose to complete a core final-year BEd subject on inclusive education by means of a Service-learning pathway, rather than a traditional University-learning pathway (Carrington & Saggars, 2008; Saggars & Carrington, 2008). Service-learning is a pedagogy in which theory is combined with practice and academic learning in the classroom is combined with Service-learning in the community (Butin, 2005a). An awareness and understanding of others in the community is an important skill for pre-service teachers to develop if they are to become effective, inclusive classroom teachers. Developing an awareness and understanding of others is consistent with the social constructivist paradigm.

Elements of social constructivism, specific to this qualitative study, include *student engagement in authentic tasks found in complex learning environments* where students

participate in a process of *social collaboration* (Adams, 2006; Powell & Kalina, 2009). Through their participation in Service-learning programs, students have opportunities to engage in 'real world' learning beyond the classroom, where they can experience diversity in people's cultures, backgrounds, abilities and needs and, in the process, have their assumptions about the world challenged (Ryan, Carrington, Selva, & Healy, 2009). Such a developing awareness serves to promote cultural competence in pre-service teachers. They are placed in a position to challenge traditional educational practices and reflect on links, both anticipated and created, between the individual and the curriculum (Carrington & Saggars, 2008). Service-learning is described as a transformative experience (Carrington, Mercer & Kimber, 2010) that supports the development of cross-cultural, interpersonal and communication skills, which are cornerstones of intercultural competence.

Our Service-learning program, termed the *Patches* program, refers to similar 'patch working' programs in which students complete small group and/or individual writing tasks; each writing task becomes a 'patch' that eventually creates a 'quilt of learning' (Dalrymple & Smith, 2008). In our *Patches* program, we extended the concept of *Patches* solely focusing on writing tasks to a wider notion of intercultural competence, where the Australian pre-service teachers participated in interactive, intercultural activities (including writing) with international students (Malaysian). The notion of intercultural competence was derived from Deardorff: students display the 'ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes' (2006, 238); that is, students are able to demonstrate their capabilities to engage with a culturally diverse range of individuals in a variety of situations. It was our intention, through the *Patches* program, to provide opportunities for participants to experience differences and similarities between their culture and that of another culture and so step outside their own culture to view such interactions critically.

Butin (2005a), a strong proponent of Service-learning, suggests that there are four lenses through which one can consider the effectiveness of a Service-learning program: (1), *technical*, which focuses on the pedagogical effectiveness of the program; (2), *cultural*, which focuses on the meanings and practices for the individuals serving and those they serve; (3), *political*, which focuses on the promotion and empowerment and/or disempowerment of the various participants' voices within the practice of social justice; and (4), *post-modern*, which focuses on whether the program sustains or disrupts boundaries and norms by which the participants make sense of themselves and their world.

Because there is no single established form of how Service-learning should be conducted, each institution must localise its program for both the students serving and the communities they serve. In our research, we utilised Butin's four lenses to explore how the Service-learning pre-service teachers' perceptions of their intercultural competence had developed through their participation in the *Patches* program.

Participants

The participants in this study were enrolled in a core fourth-year subject on inclusive education, which is delivered in first semester each year. In 2010, 382 undergraduates enrolled in the subject and in 2011, 383 students were enrolled. Prior to the commencement of first semester, final-year pre-service teachers must select either the Service-learning pathway or a traditional University-learning pathway to complete the subject. A wide range of placement options is provided for the pre-service teachers who choose the Service-learning pathway; for example, working with children or adults who have disabilities, working with individuals who have acquired brain injuries, or working with students at a refugee centre.

One of their options was a placement in the *Patches* program. This involved 14 final year BEd pre-service teachers from Australia in 2010 and another 14 in 2011.

The community members the Australian pre-service teachers 'served', in both 2010 and 2011, were cohorts of second-year BEd pre-service teachers from Malaysia who were studying at the same university. The 2010 cohort comprised 57 pre-service teachers and the 2011 cohort 56. The Malaysian pre-service teachers were enrolled in a BEd (TESL) transnational twinning program. In this program, students complete their first and fourth years of study at an institute of higher education in Malaysia and their second and third years at the Australian university. A common concern for international students is that they rarely have opportunities to interact with domestic students outside of formal classes (Eisenclas & Trecaskes, 2007; Zhao and Wildermeersch, 2008). This is also true of domestic students, in that they rarely find opportunities to mix with international students outside classroom time. Without such opportunities, it is difficult for domestic students to develop intercultural competencies and for international students to improve their language and academic skills and gain a better understanding of the social context in which they are immersed (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day 2010) Through participation in the *Patches* program, both cohorts of students were given opportunities to interact extensively outside classroom time. However, our focus in this paper is on the Service-learning of the Australian pre-service teachers.

Ethical clearance to include both the Australian and the Malaysian pre-service teachers in the program was gained through the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee. Students signed a consent form to participate and were informed that they could withdraw from the program at any time without comment or penalty. Across both years of the study, only one student, from Malaysia, withdrew, citing personal reasons for the decision.

The *Patches* Program

The pre-service teachers were divided into groups of approximately four Malaysian pre-service teachers to one Australian pre-service teacher. The pre-service teachers worked through the *Patches* program within these groups although, at times, the groups joined together to complete activities as larger units. The program ran over nine weeks of first semester in 2010 and 2011. During this time, both the Malaysian and Australian pre-service teachers were required to meet in three organised activities, to complete logbooks about their experiences in the program, and to participate in the writing workshops. As part of their course requirement, the Australian students had to commit 20 hours of service to complete the Service-learning component of their studies but in reality all involved in the *Patches* program spent many hours in excess of this time commitment with their Malaysian partners. The three organised activities of the *Patches* program in 2010 included (1), a visit to the *Cultural Precinct* of Brisbane (including the Queensland Museum, the Gallery of Modern Art, etc.) in order to gain an appreciation of what is on offer to residents and visitors to the city, and which was negotiated among the group members; (2), an *Amazing Race*, in which groups competed with each other in a circuit around the university campus (the purpose of which was to familiarise the Malaysian students with the layout of the campus); and (3), a *Poster Presentation* at the end of the program, in which students displayed photographs, drawings and written text describing what they had engaged in over the nine weeks of the *Patches* program.

In addition to the three organised activities, writing workshops were conducted each week. All pre-service teachers were invited to participate in the writing workshops. Across both years, the Malaysian pre-service teachers attended the writing workshops but only some of the Australian pre-service teachers attended in 2010 because of their highly varied work

and study commitments. In hindsight, however, we came to realise that the writing workshops (which focused on the development of reflective thinking and writing skills, particularly in relation to developing intercultural competence as a teacher) were a vital component of the *Patches* program.

As a result, all of the Australian pre-service teachers in 2011 were required to participate in the six writing workshops. Another minor change to the program in 2011 was that the peer groups each produced a DVD rather than giving a poster presentation, so all students had copies of their intercultural journey.

Data Collection and Analyses

Data for the *Patches* program were collected by means of focus group interviews (2010) and the soliciting of writing samples, both Service-learning Reflection Logs (2010 and 2011) and *Patches*' of writing completed during the writing workshops (2011). The data were categorised according to the four lenses of Service-learning (Butin, 2005b): the technical, the cultural, the political and the post-modern; and underwent a cross-checking process to ensure inter-rater reliability.

Focus Group Interviews

Interviews were conducted in Week 9 of the program in 2010. Ten of the fourteen Australian pre-service teachers participated in the interviews, which were typically of 40 minutes' duration.

Service-learning Logs

To complete the Service-learning pathway of their final-year subject, the Australian pre-service teachers were required to keep an ongoing log reflecting on their Service-learning across the program. In the log, the pre-service teachers reflected on (1), their experience of diversity and inclusive practices before beginning their service work; (2), their learning from three critical events or observations that occurred during their service work with the Malaysian students; and (3), their reflections on what they had learned that they would apply to their future teaching practice as inclusive classroom teachers. Of the 14 Australian pre-service teachers who participated in the *Patches* program each year, nine students in 2010 and ten in 2011 granted us permission to analyse and report on their reflective thinking in their Service-learning Reflection Logs.

Patches Writing Books

The writing workshops were designed to develop critical reflective thinking and writing skills. Although there was a focus on depth of reflection (Bain, Ballantyne, Mills & Lester, 2002) in each workshop, the primary focus was on the experience of writing and not on the quality of text. In responding to the writing prompts, the students adhered to the 'rules' of what Goldberg (1998) has described as 'power writing' and what, more recently, Yagelski (2009) has termed 'writing in the moment' (for example, keep your hand moving; don't cross out; don't worry about spelling, grammar or punctuation; don't try to think logically; just keep your mind loose and keep writing).

After each 'patch' of writing, the pre-service teachers were encouraged to share their writing in order to promote deeper thinking about 'self' and 'self as teacher' as well as the critical importance of intercultural communication, understanding, and relationships in living and teaching within increasingly globalised communities. The following section describes the findings of the study

Findings of the Study

The data drawn from the Australian pre-service teachers' focus group interviews (2010), Service-learning Reflection Logs (2010 and 2011) and 'Patches' of writing (2011) were analysed and categorised according to the four lenses of Service-learning (Butin, 2005b).

The Technical Lens

The technical lens focuses on pre-service teachers' perceptions of the pedagogical effectiveness of the Service-learning program and, by extension, the *Patches* program. Through this lens the Australian pre-service teachers commented on the quality, efficiency and sustainability of the program through their Service-learning logs at three points in the semester: beginning, middle and end. In the first group of reflections, pre-service teachers' anticipated what their involvement in the program might be like:

I would love to learn more about the Islamic culture, because it appears somewhat different to Australian culture. Furthermore, I would like to learn more about second language learners...I believe this learning will reinforce and extend my knowledge on inclusive education as I will be exposed to differing viewpoints, cultures, learning styles and opinions. I think this experience will also be beneficial as it will force me to reflect on my own learning experiences, values and beliefs. (Pre-service teacher 'J1', 2010)

The above comment is typical of those written by other participants in that it describes how they believed that involvement in the program would serve them as individuals (enriching their understanding of the world) and as future inclusive classroom teachers. In their final log entry, at the end of the semester, the Australian pre-service teachers reflected more specifically on the impact the program had for them as future teachers: *This small amount of time spent with my Malaysian peers caused me to think about the implications about future students I might have, about how I can cater to their needs and help them not only fit into the society or culture of a classroom, but also to shape the culture of a classroom so that it fits to them as well.* (Pre-service teacher 'T1', 2011)

Similar comments were forthcoming in the pre-service teachers' *Patches Writing Books*, which was a less formal, more spontaneous form of writing. For example: *I feel lucky to have been involved in the Patches program as my assumptions of international students have been challenged and in the process I have made some lovely, caring friends* (Pre-service teacher 'A1', 2011), and *I used to be scared of having a student who spoke English as-an-additional language in my classroom. Due to the Patches program my attitude has changed. Now I think: Bring it on!* (Pre-service teacher 'A2', 2011).

From the above it can be seen that the Service-learning component of the *Patches* program was ‘pedagogically effective’ (Butin, 2005) from the perspective of the Australian pre-service teachers. These pre-service teachers were able to relate their experiences in the program to future classroom situations in creating inclusive pedagogy.

The Cultural Lens

The *cultural lens* focuses on the promotion and empowerment and/or disempowerment of the participants within the practice of social justice. Some of the Australian participants were challenged in their thinking of culture, both their own and that of others: *I find it fascinating listening to different perspectives. One night at dinner my group asked me, ‘Why do Australians not wear shoes?’ Until they pointed it out to me I had no idea how many people walked around Brisbane with no shoes on. It is quite disgusting (that people don’t wear shoes in public). I find it fascinating that we can live in our own bubble not knowing what is happening around us until someone questions it or points it out.* (Pre-service teacher ‘El’, 2010).

One of my earliest and most revelational observations during this experience was the importance of religion in my students’ daily lives. Although I attended both a Catholic primary and high school and am baptised Greek Orthodox, religion is not a pivotal aspect of my identity or daily life. Instead, it is more of a side issue or artefact; to be drawn upon only in times of celebration or great need. However, after spending time with my peer group, I realised that they view religion quite differently: it forms an integral part of their identity, culture and traditions. When choosing and organising an outing, it was necessary to consider their religious values and beliefs. For example, we decided to organise a picnic as part of our cultural precinct visit. However, when organising this picnic, it was necessary to choose only Halal foods and select a time which did not interfere with prayer time. (Pre-service teacher ‘Jl’, 2010)

Similar cultural awareness was expressed in the ‘power writing’ (Goldberg, 1998) or ‘writing in the moment’ (Yagelski, 2009) sessions; for example: *The focus on communicating with people from other cultures has...focused my attention on Australian culture. It has made me realise some of the characteristics, both good and bad, common in many Australian individuals as compared to their Malaysian counterparts. It has given me considerations [sic] into religious differences and reluctances [sic] due to culture unfamiliarity* (Pre-service teacher ‘T’, 2011).

The *Patches* program provided the pre-service teachers with opportunities to interact with people of another culture in ways they had not experienced before. Through their interactions with the Malaysian students, the Australian pre-service teachers gained a deeper understanding of themselves, how they perceive others and how they might be perceived by others.

The Political Lens

This is focused on the idea of social justice and ensuring that inclusive practices are valued. One Australian pre-service teacher was concerned about taking his *Patches* group on an outing to the beach: *I was concerned about the reaction we might get in the fish and chip shop as well as on the beach where many of the locals choose to walk in the afternoons...from my past experience I am also aware of how 'Australians' view foreigners fishing and doing other activities in areas they consider their territory.* (Pre-service teacher 'Bi', 2010)

It is interesting that this Australian pre-service teacher stepped outside him 'self' and looked upon the locals as 'Australians' – a label he did not associate with himself in this instance. Thinking of potential ways to protect the Malaysian students from these 'Australians', this pre-service teacher is delighted that the 'Australians' on the beach are willing to so readily accept the visitors. The 'locals', in fact, were very accepting of the Malaysian students, asking about their fishing trip and if they were enjoying themselves at the beach: *I was pleased to see my groups' acceptance with the locals and that they both shared a connectedness which added to a horizon of all our life experiences.* (Pre-service teacher 'Bi', 2010)

In the above reflection this pre-service teacher reflects through a political lens by keeping himself at some distance to the experience, even though he was directly involved. He speaks about a certain kind of Australian that does not include himself. He stated that he felt a duty to protect his group of Malaysians and was pleased that the outing was success. The stance taken by this pre-service teacher embodies the concept of interculturality, in that he was able to view this situation from an 'outsider's' perspective; he was able to take a step back and view his own culture interacting with another and make some important observations about what he saw. It was through this lens that this pre-service teacher was able to identify aspects of inclusion that he could not have realised through learning theory in a classroom tutorial.

The Post-modern Lens

The post-modern lens has a focus on how Service-learning constructs, reinforces or disrupts societal norms of being and thinking (Butin, 2003). Some of the Australian pre-service teachers, for example, felt challenged by questions from the Malaysians about Australian culture while others found the experience challenged their stereotypical views of others: *I found it terribly difficult trying to justify something when I had no idea why it is perceived as the 'norm'. This experience led me to question some of these so-called 'norms' of our invisible culture.* (Pre-service teacher 'El', 2010)

I learnt that there are some things that are hard to explain yet inherently known by many Australians. One such example came to me when S and J both asked me at different times of the day, 'What do Aboriginals look like?' and 'Where do they live?' I found myself struggling to find the words to describe answers to both questions...how to tell if someone is indigenous or not...and how to explain the communities...to a visitor to Australia – trying to stick to facts and not opinion! (Pre-service teacher 'C', 2011)

These pre-service teachers felt challenged when they were prompted by their Malaysian peers' questions to examine what they had previously accepted as the 'norms' of Australian culture.

They were also challenged to examine what their new relationship with a culturally and linguistically diverse group of students could bring to their understanding of themselves as individuals and as future inclusive classroom teachers. The final quotation above is of particular interest because it expresses recurring themes about the *Patches* program from the

focus group interviews: that is, the challenging of expectations and the development of unexpected friendships. Both themes were mentioned frequently by both the Australian and the Malaysian pre-service teachers.

Discussion

The *Patches* program presented the Australian pre-service teachers with a number of challenges, which they worked to overcome across the nine weeks of the program. First, some of the Australian Service-learning students approached their volunteer work from a presumption of helping the 'needier' Malaysian students; for example, pre-service teacher 'E' joined the program anticipating that she could '*...help the Malaysian students with their English*'. While language was a common tie between the two groups (the Malaysians were competent English speakers), there were times when language acted as a barrier for the Australian pre-service teachers. At one point, one of the Australian pre-service teachers remarked that she felt left out of the conversation because the Malaysians had talked to each other in Bahasa and then laughed. The Australian demanded that they tell her what they said. In this incident, the Australian pre-service teacher was the outsider, something she did not expect to happen to her in her own culture. In this small interaction, the power balance had been 'turned on its head' for her. This was not an uncommon beginning for many of the Australian pre-service teachers and serves to highlight how 'scratching the surface' of the way in which one understands cultural competence can so easily be challenged. This student and other Australian pre-service teachers who had taken on the responsibility of 'enlightening' the Malaysians about Australian culture, often found that they were the ones to be enlightened.

Several of the Australian pre-service teachers had approached their participation in the program as being ambassadors for Australia. They began their participation by situating the Malaysians as the 'other' (Singh & Doherty 2007). They felt a need to show these visitors how Australians really behaved. However, these students were confronted when the Malaysians asked questions that were not what the Australians expected to be asked. Hassam (2007) suggests that Australia has spent a lot of time and money mythologising what it means to be 'Australian' (the ideal images of kangaroos and beaches) and it may be that the Australian pre-service teachers had absorbed this mythology themselves as something to present to visitors as the 'real' Australia.

But these were not questions the Malaysian pre-service teachers asked. As suggested above, the Malaysian pre-service teachers asked such things as: '*Why do so many Australians walked barefoot through the streets?*' and '*Why do so many Australian students drink themselves into oblivion (as perceived by the Malaysian students) every Friday night?*' The Australian pre-service teachers found such questions confronting – questions that they had never before asked themselves. Behaviour that had gone unobserved as being 'normal' ('*We just do it because we do it*') was suddenly seen as 'not normal'. In this, it was the Australian pre-service teachers who suffered a kind of cultural shock about their own culture; they were the ones to become the 'other'. This was a significant revelation for the Australian pre-service teachers because they had initially tried to situate the Malaysian students socially as the 'other'. Australian pre-service teacher 'Bi' worried that the locals might behave as racists towards the Malaysian students, perhaps because of the negative media reporting that had occurred about the treatment of international students at the time (Crikey, January 2010; *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 2010). Pre-service teacher 'B' was surprised when the locals proved to be friendly and curious and wished the Malaysian pre-service teachers a happy stay in Australia. Before going to the beach he had prepared himself mentally as to

how he would handle any adverse reactions towards the Malaysians but he found that it was not necessary, even when the Malaysians stopped on the beach to pray. He stated that the Malaysian pre-service teachers had prayed at his home before they went to the beach but he did not anticipate that they would pray again at the beach. When they did, he was surprised but pleased with the reaction of the locals: ...*that was something you don't see every day and it was good to see that but also the interaction with the locals on the beach...* (Pre-service teacher 'Bi', 2010)

These incidents illustrate the effectiveness of having Service-learning pre-service teachers engage in the *Patches* program as a way to enhance greater awareness of intercultural competence in undergraduate pre-service teachers. Indeed, both groups in the *Patches* program commented on how they expected that their participation would assist them as teachers in inclusive learning environments. However, one of the greatest achievements to come out of the program was that the participants came to view each other as friends. In some instances, group members described their relationship as 'life-long' friends and/or as 'family'. This deepening of the social aspect of the program was unplanned but welcomed by both groups of pre-service teachers. We suggest that this happened because the participants were able to view and interact with each other through social contact outside the formal classroom setting.

The time the groups spent together in peer-initiated activities (beyond the writing workshops and scheduled activities) was significantly greater than the 20-hour commitment required by the Service-learning program and included elements not planned for the *Patches* program. On their own initiative, the groups of Australian and Malaysian pre-service teachers spent time at each others' homes cooking meals, sharing picnics and holding parties to celebrate birthdays. They also went shopping, horse-back riding and camping together at weekends and engaged in many other activities, including playing soccer and attending football matches. The relationships between the Australian and Malaysian pre-service teachers evolved over time as relationships do, but we have observed that many of the relationships have continued beyond the academic year. We believe that the *Patches* program acted as a catalyst for intercultural relationships and the development of intercultural competence by giving the Australian and Malaysian pre-service teachers scaffolded opportunities to interact outside the classroom.

Conclusions

The *Patches* program has become a unique form of Service-learning in that went beyond the reciprocal nature of the learning and relationships among the Australian and Malaysian pre-service teachers (Butin, 2003); the program was deliberately designed to ensure the *equality* of both groups. We wanted our Australian Service-learning students to abandon a mind-set that they were mentors 'providing service' and to recognise that they were 'being of service', giving of themselves in equal partnership with the Malaysian students. This equality was reinforced each week as the Australian and Malaysian pre-service teachers worked on an equally salient skill (reflective writing) and shared their 'patches' of writing. Changes in perspectives about interculturality occurred during these sharing sessions when both groups stated that their identities had been challenged and that they were able to see how to use these challenges to their advantage in gaining a deeper understanding of who they were, how to respond to the 'other', and how this transformational learning could apply to their future work as teachers.

Although our approach to Service-learning is still in its nascent stages, we believe that ongoing research in this important domain and on this particular program is warranted. With

the growing trend toward the internationalisation of higher education (de Wit, 2009), increasing numbers of university students are seeking to complete some, if not all, of their programs of studies in institutions located in other countries. On the basis of our preliminary findings, we believe that the kind of Service-learning program we have offered provides university students, particularly pre-service teachers, with rich opportunities to develop intercultural competencies and to appreciate how their lives and their communities can be enhanced through their greater understanding of themselves as well as others from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

In relation to our own teaching practices, we have found that Service-learning is a highly effective pedagogy that encourages pre-service teachers to step outside their comfort zones and, in the process, discover more about themselves and others in the community with whom they would not normally interact. Teacher education in Australia has a strong focus on training pre-service teachers to become inclusive educators. The *Patches* program provides a successful addition to the education of pre-service teachers by demonstrating in an authentic manner just how inclusive education theory can be enacted in the real world.

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