Patches: A Model for Developing Interculturality

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Abstract

The 'Patches' program is a dynamic support model that provided Malaysian and Australian pre-service teachers with both structured and unstructured opportunities to develop intercultural understandings. While many support programs for international students are unidirectional the Patches program framed both cohorts of students to interact in intercultural learning as a two-way process. Although participation in the program was voluntary for both groups, all who joined were required to engage in weekly writing workshops and additional socio-cultural activities. While three of the activities were organised by the lecturers, the Malaysian and Australian students quickly formed friendships and more spontaneous activities occurred. The Patches program provided the international students with a purpose and support for forming real connections to the local community. For the Australian students, relationships with the Malaysian students became a powerful vehicle for internationalisation including a questioning of familiar viewpoints and assumptions and a consideration of alternative and compelling perspectives.

Keywords

Internationalisation, higher education, model, intercultural learning, intercultural competence, interculturality

Introduction

The purpose of the current research was to test a model of support for international and domestic Australian students to develop interculturality. Much has been written about the increasing number and mobility of tertiary students seeking international educational opportunities (Guruz, 2011). Since the 1980s, there has been a phenomenal increase in the number of international students enrolling in Australian universities, such that in 2008, as many as 18% of tertiary enrolments were international students (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2008) and international education has now become an important part of the Australian economy (McKenzie, 2008).

Accepting international students on campus is a compelling financial incentive for many universities, but as full fee-paying consumers, international students expect more than just a seat in a classroom for the money they are investing in their education and in the host economy. Without the kind of social and emotional support that creates a sense of inclusion at a university, these education 'consumers' often find themselves feeling disenfranchised as 'outsiders' and vulnerable as they struggle with language and cultural differences that compound their academic responsibilities (Marginson, 2012). International students who arrive with high expectations that they will be warmly accepted by their host universities can become frustrated, and even depressed, living in their new environments when these expectations are not met (Caluya, Probyn & Vyas, 2011). Researchers have found that without structured interventions built into programs interactions between international and domestic students do not naturally occur, constraining international students' opportunities for intercultural connections. For example, Kimmel and Volet (2012) found that domestic students did not interact on a voluntary and frequent basis with international students whether learning environments provided enabling or inhibiting characteristics. Turner (2009) organised intercultural tutorial groupings of international (Chinese) and domestic (United Kingdom) students. Her findings report that overall students found these groupings as unsatisfactory due in a large part to intercultural literacy and language gaps between the groups. However, through their group engagement, participants learned more about interculturality. Leask and Carroll (2011) suggest that

attention needs to be paid to the design and management of tasks when bringing groups together. In particular students need to understand the nature for the groupings, the effort and time needed to complete tasks as intercultural groups and that the set tasks are authentic, and so meaningful to all students. Leask and Carroll also suggest that such intercultural interactions should fit within both the formal and informal curriculum. The informal curriculum includes the everyday practice of educators and extra-curricular activities. One way of connecting students through the informal curriculum is through a buddy system where domestic students volunteer to support international students during the first few months of arrival (Campbell, 2012). We contend that the Patches program fits within both the formal and informal curriculum by connecting part of the program to existing curriculum and by providing a support program through an informal curriculum.

The Patches Program

The 'Patches' program was designed to be a dynamic support framework, which would provide Malaysian and Australian pre-service teachers with both structured and unstructured opportunities to develop intercultural understandings. The Patches program involved grouping four or five Malaysian pre-service teachers (in their second and third year of Bachelor of Education (BEd) studies) with one Australian pre-service teacher (in their 4th year) who was completing a Service-learning component of study. In a core final-year unit on inclusive education, the domestic students had an opportunity to engage with a Service-learning pathway. In this pathway the domestic students complete at least 20 hours of volunteer work with a range of service organisations including homework centres for refugee children, respite centres for the frail and the elderly, and life skills centres for adults with intellectual disabilities. One of the choices the Australian students had was to volunteer to participate in the Patches program with a cohort of Malaysian pre-service teachers studying at the same university.

All of the participants in the Patches program – both the international and domestic students –were required to engage in weekly writing workshops (for six weeks) and in additional lecturer-generated small group activities such as visiting Brisbane's cultural precinct. The purpose of the writing workshops was to provide structure for the international (Malaysian) and domestic (Australian) pre-service teachers to develop the capacity to reflect on their growing professional identities, based loosely on Dalrymple and Smith's (2008) model, and how these identities are shaped within a cultural context. Within many disciplines, especially teacher education, reflective writing is frequently utilised as a way of strengthening reflective capabilities (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Nonetheless, many students struggle with reflective thinking and writing and need specific assistance to develop these capabilities (Bain, Ballantyne, Mills & Lester, 2002; Moon, 2004; Ryan, 2011).

In the writing workshops, it was of paramount importance that the Australian pre-service teachers abandoned a mind-set that they were "providing service" and rather recognised that they were "being of service" – giving of themselves in equal peer partnership with the Malaysian pre-service teachers. We did not want the Australian pre-service teachers correcting the Malaysian pre-service teachers' oral or written language. We wanted all of the pre-service teachers, whether Australian or Malaysian, to understand that they were not deficient in skills but rather were in the process of strengthening their reflective writing skills. To reinforce this critical distinction, the academics facilitating the workshops also completed the required Patches of writing and shared portions of their writing with the pre-service teachers.

The purpose for the additional activities beyond the writing workshops was to encourage social intercultural interactions outside the classroom. Without such opportunities for social interaction, it is difficult for international students to improve their language and academic skills, gain a better understanding of the social context in which they are studying (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010), and develop intercultural social and communication skills that will assist them in developing and

maintaining relationships with domestic students (Gresham & Clayton, 2011). As noted by Leask (2009), an informal curriculum should not be thought of as unstructured. Lecturers have an obligation to provide some structure between the two groups rather than just hoping connections will be made in a happenstance way.

While the initial activities – writing workshops and social activities – were arranged by the lecturers, the Malaysian and Australian students quickly formed friendships and generated more spontaneous interactions, ranging from sharing dinner parties, birthday parties, going to football games together, camping, horseback riding and going to the beach. The Patches program provided key missing elements for international students in supporting them to form real world connections with peers within the local community. The program also benefited domestic pre-service teachers in that they had opportunities to become aware of and question familiar, cultural viewpoints and assumptions as well as to examine the international students' often varied and compelling perspectives on life in Brisbane.

The first scaffolded social activity was also 'a requirement' of the program and involved the pre-service teachers visiting the Cultural Precinct in Brisbane. Most groups recorded their visit with still photographs and video. The remaining component of the program involved the groups of students organising a series of peer-initiated activities (e.g., shopping, going to the movies, bush-walking, camping, horse-back riding, and cooking meals for each other in their homes). All three components, the writing workshops, the visit to the Cultural Precinct, and the peer-initiated activities provided opportunities for the students to engage in intercultural communication, to develop intercultural understanding, and to build intercultural relationships. A summary recording of activities in digital format was required to provide students' evaluation of their participation in the program as so, thereby provided the researchers with valuable feedback as to the program's effectiveness For the purposes of the present paper, we have focused on the development of interculturality, which we define loosely as thoughtful participation in communication among individuals from diverse cultures. Accordingly, the primary research question guiding the study was:

> *Does engaging in a scaffolded informal curriculum (the Patches program) promote deeper thinking about interculturality - communication, understanding, and relationships in living and teaching within increasingly globalised communities?*

Design

The study utilised a "practical action research" design in order to accommodate interactions between the researchers and the pre-service teachers involved in the Patches program. Specifically, the study used an *action research spiral* (Creswell, 2008) design that involved developing an action plan for developing critical reflective writing skills and interculturality, collecting and analysing the data and interpreting the results. The first action research spiral, competed before the first semester began, involved the lecturers developing a rational for the study as well as the initial process for implementing the Patches program. The second spiral focused on the implementation of the program. This paper reports on the development of interculturality during the second spiral.

Participants

The participants in the study were 56 pre-service teachers from Malaysia who were studying in Australia (10 males, 46 females) and 11 Australian pre-service teachers (4 males, 7 females); all participants were studying within the same Faculty of Education. The Malaysian pre-service teachers were enrolled in the second year of a four-year Bachelor of Education (Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) transnational twinning program. In this program, students complete their first and

fourth year of study at an institute of higher education in Malaysia and years two and three of their BEd course at Queensland University of Technology.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for the study included samples of the Malaysian and Australian pre-service teachers' weekly reflective writing, transcriptions of focus group interviews, the pre-service teachers' responses to a final reflective questionnaire and students' digital summary of their participation in the program. Reflective writing logs were submitted at the end of the program for analysis, although students participated in weekly discussions of their writing throughout the semester. Preliminary focus group interviews were conducted at the beginning of semester to determine students' perceived level of interculturality. A final set of focus group interviews were conducted at the end of semester to determine whether there was a change in students' perceived level of interculturality. The questionnaire (Adams, 2001; Brookfield, 1995) provided additional information about the pre-service teachers' perceptions of reflective thinking and writing, intercultural communication, and how scaffolding through the Patches Program could be improved. The questionnaire was delivered at the end of semester when the program was formally ended. Throughout the semester, the lecturers met weekly to debrief as to the progress of the program, identifying strengths to build on and other areas that needed further consideration.

The data were examined and interpreted throughout the spirals of action research with ongoing researcher reflection shaping the investigation. Interpretations were initially coded into broad themes to determine what patterns if any were revealed. From these themes, core categories were developed and labelled, highlighting each occurrence with reference to the frequency of data for each category. The core categories included: growing professional identities, barriers to developing interculturality and academic reflective practice; sub-categories such as personal/professional reflective writing, cultural assumptions/beliefs were related to the core categories. These categories were cross-referenced by the two researchers in order to achieve a level of transparency for analysis (Lomax & Parker, 1995) as well as the validity of our findings.

At the end of the program participants created a poster or digital representation of their participation in the Patches program as a record summarising the value of their engagement within the group. Data from these summaries were also included in the analysis and provided structure for the questions asked in the final focus group interviews.

Results

The results of the study are presented verbatim from students' workbooks or interview data in order to preserve the authenticity of the pre-service teachers' 'voices.' The core categories are embedded in the three sections, which reflect the elements of interculturality highlighted in the primary research question; that is, communication, understanding and relationships.

Intercultural Communication:

One of the questions on the final reflective questionnaire asked the participants, *How has the Patches program helped you to learn more about intercultural communication?* All of the participants agreed that initially they held concerns that they would not be understood or accepted by their peers; in particular, that they would not be able to communicate with each other on a meaningful level. These concerns were allayed over the course of the program as students developed comfortable relationships and in some cases, close friendships. The following excerpt describes how participants had been positively affected through their involvement in the Patches program. One Malaysian student noted:

> *As I first arrived in Brisbane, I was overpowered by fear and nervousness in regards to communicating with the Australian people. Fear that they may be prejudiced and refuse to befriend us because of our religion, and nervous because our spoken English is not as good as theirs, hence a reason to ignore us. But the Patches program has proved that such a thing is not true as I have the chance to meet lovely and friendly people like T., her family and also her boyfriend. They showed me how nice Australian people are to everyone they meet and they are very eager and interested to learn about our culture (AN)*

This viewpoint was expressed by many of the Malaysian pre-service teachers in the program. They had come expecting to meet with barriers to making friends and interacting with domestic students, and were pleasantly surprised to be so warmly accepted by their service-learning partners. Assumptions on the part of the domestic students as to what to expect in interactions with the Malaysian students were also challenged. Over time this sense of awareness about the importance of communication was mirrored by the Australian peers:

> *I have learned to be a better listener, to let others tell their stories before I tell mine. I have also been reminded of how similar we really all are as we share cultural experiences together. We're all a part of one world and the more we connect with people from different backgrounds, the richer our life experiences become (NM)*

Intercultural Understanding:

Communication was a key area for bringing the Malaysian and Australians together. It marked the cornerstone for developing intercultural understandings and allowed both groups to shift out of their comfort zones to develop an appreciation of the 'other'. In doing so, they developed a better understanding of self and others, as is described by one Malaysian pre-service teacher:

> *From this program [Patches] I think that the beliefs and assumptions I have are challenged as some of them are unexpected…I had a mind that being with others…I don't know might not be easy, especially people who are from a different country with a different religion or views. But somehow I found out that it is easier as long as I can be 'open' enough about people (BM)*

The Australian pre-service teachers came to similar awareness:

> *I have been challenged to not see myself as the dominant or the expert but to put myself on the same level, regardless of someone's English ability…I hadn't really realised I had this attitude until I had to confront it, to take myself off my self-placed pedestal! (NM)*

The above comments also related to the pre-service teachers' growing professional identities. When asked how they felt their participation in the program related to their future teaching practices, the pre-service teachers from both groups identified that they would in all likelihood be teaching school students of mixed abilities and cultural backgrounds as teachers. They described that having the opportunity to establish relationships with each other through the Patches program they were now able to appreciate others' cultural and linguistic backgrounds different to their own. They believed these interactions would benefit them as teachers in understanding and supporting culturally and linguistically diverse students in their teaching.

Intercultural Relationships:

The unexpected part of the Patches program was the deep friendships that were made between the two groups of pre-service teachers. One Australian student encapsulates this:

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I thought I would be totally out of my depth in the Patches Program…little did I know the Malaysian students have a very similar sense of humour, watch the same TV shows and like the same things as me. I now consider them to be my good friends (AG)

The data revealed that both groups of pre-service teachers had fairly narrow views of each others' cultures before meeting and described that without the Patches program they would probably not have interacted with each other, even when in the same tutorial groups on campus. One Australian pre-service teacher, on the strength of the friendships she forged through the Patches program, chose to complete one of her teaching practica in Malaysia. This strong commitment to developing interculturality was attributed to participation in the program.

The data revealed a boost in participants' growing professional identities in relation to better understanding how to engage diversity as teachers. Results indicated that both groups benefited by participating in the Patches program. The reflective writing sessions played an essential role in allowing participants to explore their beliefs about inclusive teaching practices in relation to the beliefs of others in a non-threatening environment. While each group brought concerns about potential barriers to intercultural interactions, engagement in the program highlighted to participants that these barriers (cultural assumptions and beliefs) were self-generated and so needed to be self-managed if they were to be overcome. Self-management came in the form of voluntary engagement with others and through weekly reflective writing and discussions on their engagement in the program.

Discussion

The study has provided initial support for a semi-structured practice model designed to support the development of interculturality among international and domestic students. The program was a conscious effort by the researchers to provide both groups of students with opportunities to engage with others who they may not normally have done, and in particular, to address the feelings of isolation and loneliness that international students can feel (Caluya et al., 2011; Marginson, 2012). While the participants in the current research were pre-service teachers in a Faculty of Education, we contend that the model is not specific to any one discipline. International and domestic students from any faculty or enrolled in any course of study hold in common their career goals (for our students to become teachers) as well as their fundamental human desire for connection. More research to test this hypothesis in needed.

While we contend that the essential ingredients of the model could be applied to developing interculturality among international and domestic students in any discipline, what is essential is 'academic' and 'socio-cultural' scaffolding to bring students together in a supported and purposeful manner (Leask, 2009; Leask & Carroll, 2011). In the case of the Patches program, the 'academic' scaffold was the shared salient skill of reflective writing while the 'socio-cultural' scaffold related to familiarising all of the students to the rapidly developing university environment and nearby cultural precinct. Providing scaffolding was critical to the success of the program as a guide and support for participation in the program.

The unstructured, largely spontaneous activities (dinners, parties, etc.) generated by the participants provided many and varied opportunities for the development of interculturality. These activities are what both groups reported on in their writing activities and weekly discussions as most relevant to developing an understanding of each other's cultures and everyday behaviours, both academically as students and personally (outside the university environment). The activities were organised by the students themselves and, indeed the researchers generally only knew about them after the fact

when students reported on them in weekly discussions. In the summary digital presentations, these were the activities participants described as most valuable in promoting interculturality.

Despite the strengths and contributions of the present study, there are a number of limitations that are important to note. First, the study utilised a within-subjects design to develop an understanding of the complexities involved in developing pre-service teachers' interculturality. While we obtained valuable information about the experiences of these Malaysian and Australian pre-service teachers we are unable to generalise our findings more broadly.

Second, the participants were recruited by non-random means and their numbers within and across groups and gender were very uneven. As a result, the study may not have captured a full range of Malaysian and Australian pre-service teachers' experiences with regard to developing interculturality. Again, these factors limit the generalisability of our findings.

Despite these limitations, the present action research study has examined the development of interculturality by a particular group of international and domestic pre-service teachers and obtained findings that contribute to the existing literature and suggest avenues for future research. Further studies engaging larger groups of participants across other disciplines would allow for more robust explorations of the efficacy of the practice model and student development of interculturality. Additionally, studies that are longitudinal in scope across both years of pre-service teacher training and the transition period into teaching practice would be valuable in developing an understanding of how interculturality supports the development of teachers who are effective in teaching and supporting diverse students in their inclusive classrooms.

In working with our Malaysian and Australian students through the Patches program, which rested upon a scaffolding of weekly reflective writing workshops and semi-structured small group social activities, we have been able to document the students growth in interculturality as well as critical reflective writing skills. We have also observed positive developments in their self-confidence, sense of personal and professional identity, and intercultural relationships. We believe that the Patches practice model has indeed resulted in 'productive and amicable intercultural relationships' (Bennett, Volet & Fozdar, 2013, p. 533) and that the model could be utilised successfully with students from any discipline.

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