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Cultural safety in university teaching and learning

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Abstract

World population mobility as well as distance learning has led to increased multiculturalism on campuses and virtual classrooms. Immigration and travel calls for more accurate knowledge of cultural health and safety. This paper explores cultural safety, stereotyping and possible actions in the direction of raising awareness in a multicultural teaching and learning environment. The example of Nursing Education is used.

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Motto: We are like all other people, like some other people and like no other person (Kluckhohn & Murray, 1948).

1. Introduction

World population mobility as well as distance learning has led to increasing multiculturalism on campuses and virtual classrooms. Due to globalization, nearly all universities list students with different cultural backgrounds. Concurrently with the education phenomena, immigration of all kinds and purposes, along with travel, be it for business or pleasure, call for deeper understanding and more accurate knowledge of cultural health and safety. Cultural diversity has been on the agenda of numerous governments, while Canada, Australia and the United States remain traditional leaders in multiculturalism policy. One may ask why it is important to understand other cultures. Leininger (2002) argued that without critical awareness, researchers and service

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providers tend to impose their beliefs, values and patterns of behaviour upon cultures other than their own, making it harder to recruit and sustain the participation of minorities.

The level of comfort for all cultures on campus need to improve, in order to insure safety and well being if we are to live and study together. A safe environment is necessary for scientific inquiry, exchange and dialogue to take place. Therefore, efforts are being put forth by universities around the world to build awareness of cultural diversity for the professionals of tomorrow, considering multiple initiatives to accept and celebrate cultural diversity. One university that has taken these types of initiatives is the University of Botswana. Botswana is a multi-cultural society, with several different languages spoken throughout the country. The student body at University of Botswana is a reflection of this society. As Lubinda (2010) reports, the University organizes an annual Cultural Diversity Day to celebrate their community. Students and faculty carry out research in the languages and cultures of various tribes. University of Botswana has taken a leadership role in compiling dictionaries and developing language codification (Lubinda, 2010).

In most universities of North America, there is some form of cultural diversity (Bennett & Salonen, 2010). Cuyjet, Howard-Hamilton and Cooper (2011), emphasize the importance of student organizations for cultural safety, competence, and diversity. They stress the importance of both curriculum activities and co-curricular life on campus. Additionally, these authors underline the importance of creating a positive relationship between the university administrators and the student organizations in order to improve, promote and celebrate cultural diversity in the campus setting.

Brustein (2007) emphasizes the importance of including international studies in more university programs. He suggests that while most universities prepare students for one specific field, they must also learn to work and live in a global society. He suggests that if some form of international studies were included in the mandatory course lists, students would have better job prospects when they graduate. For example, the University of Pittsburgh established a Certificate in Global Studies and philosophy degree in international and area studies, which are complimentary to other programs. Also, several universities in the United States, notably Michigan State University, encourage research to be done with international contributions. These are but simple beginnings of the measures that some American universities are taking to help build culturally aware professionals.

In Canada, similar but more specific efforts to raise cultural competence are being made by universities. Indigenous Peoples of Canada are seeking to create health care professionals that will improve the quality of their health care. Case in point, the University of Saskatchewan, the First Nations University of Canada and the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology have created a nursing program specifically geared towards Northern Saskatchewan's demographic map and culture (Anonson et al., 2008). This program gives the opportunity to several Aboriginal students to prosper in school and later on in their professional careers.

2. History of Concepts - Cultural Competence, Cultural Safety, Cultural Humility

2.1. Cultural competence

Cultural competence can be viewed and interpreted from many perspectives. The basic concept of cultural competence is simply knowledge of culture. Researchers have developed models to more specifically determine what cultural competence is. The conceptual framework of cultural competence includes a spectrum of three components: cultural awareness and beliefs, cultural knowledge, and cultural skills (Sue, 2006). The level of proficiency in a combination of these three elements illustrates how culturally competent an individual or organization is.

More complex models exist as well. One model used globally is the Purnell model for cultural competence (Purnell, 2002). It is composed of 12 domains that demonstrate many dimensions of culture: overview/heritage, communication, family roles and organization, workforce issues, biocultural ecology, high-risk behaviors, nutrition, pregnancy and childbearing practices, death rituals, spirituality, health care practice, and health care practitioner. This model, when compared to Sue's model, shows contrasting views of cultural competence. No one single model will ever be complete, but it is important to be aware of the many different models and their particular strengths.

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