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Navigating diversity with nursing students through difficult dialogues: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

The *Difficult Dialogues* project is an international initiative that promotes the development of the art and skill of civil discourse as an essential outcome of higher education. At the University of the Free State, South Africa, the project is implemented by the Centre for Teaching and Learning. When intergroup conflict started disrupting the academic performance of first year nursing students, the School of Nursing consulted with the centre to facilitate a *Difficult Dialogues* session. This article describes the engineering of a session programme to facilitate learning about navigating diversity and responding to conflict in a constructive way. The rich data of a qualitative inquiry conducted via the Critical Incident Questionnaire are triangulated with literature and other feedback provided to describe to what extent the session contributed towards student learning. A number of participants indicated that they had learnt to respect diversity and had realised that they could co-operate as a team in spite of individual differences. As additional evidence, the students listed specific skills that could aid them in navigating diversity and conflict in future. Considering that the School strives to establish inclusion during the orientation of students, this case raises questions about the sufficiency of such endeavours. In conclusion it is asked to what extent nurse educators should be expected to implement strategies to address issues of diversity in the classroom on a continuous basis.

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1. Introduction and background

The *Difficult Dialogues* project promotes the development of the art and skill of civil discourse in higher education. The initiative originated in the United States of America (USA) where its main mission is to strengthen a democratically engaged society, hereby reflecting a commitment to pluralism and academic freedom [The Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Expression (TJCPFE), 2006]. This mission is pursued through the encouragement of respectful, transformative dialogue on controversial topics and complex social issues. University classrooms are ideal venues for creating democratic spaces in which students can master this art and skill of civil discourse.

Civil discourse involves respectful argumentation where competing points of view are expressed, considered and evaluated in an environment of mutual respect (Landis, 2008, p. viii). Handling controversy with civility is listed as one of the key

dimensions of leadership for positive social change and is deemed to be an essential outcome of higher education [Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) 1996, cited in Komives, Wagner & Associates, 2009, p. xiii]. Conversely, Barkley (2010, p. 111) explains that student incivility, ranging from a lack of consideration and respect to overt hostility and aggression, not only undermines the sense of community in the classroom, but also seriously disrupts the learning environment. As citizens of a democracy, students need to learn to resolve conflicts of interest constructively thus taking a nonviolent approach to dealing with difficult issues (Johnson & Johnson, 2010, p. 223; Landis, 2008, p. viii). Therefore respectful discussions on contentious issues provide enriching and transformative learning opportunities for students (Jaschik, 2009; Mezirow, 2012, p. 80).

Efforts to help students achieve higher order skills are closely linked to the University of the Free State's vision to be "recognised across the world for excellence in academic achievement and in human reconciliation". One of the strategic initiatives of this university is the Human Project that strives, amongst others, to create a culture of inclusion through the promotion of respect, discussion, dialogue and dissent [University of the Free State (UFS), 2012]. The

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aim is to demonstrate the value of human reconciliation through “human togetherness and solidarity across social and historical divides”. Educators and students should learn, for example, to respect differences of culture, language, and national origins, which is evidenced by their willingness to put aside social differences and work together towards the achievement of academic and social success (Ramohai, 2013, p. 432; UFS, 2012).

In pursuit of the above, the *Difficult Dialogues* project was launched at the UFS in 2012 and is coordinated by the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL). The centre provides professional development and support to enable academic members of staff to encounter controversy more effectively and to engage students in explorations of controversial issues relating to curricular content. Another initiative of the university was to establish a full-credit, compulsory, interdisciplinary module that engages all first year students in in-depth discussions to address issues such as ethics, race, and identity (UFS, 2012).

The School of Nursing supports the different strategic initiatives in the first year undergraduate programme. To further promote a culture of inclusion and to facilitate acclimatisation to the UFS environment, the School and the nursing profession, first year nursing students receive academic and social support from senior nursing students on entering the university. Since the parallel medium language policy of the university essentially segregates students in terms of heritage groups, the classes for the General Nursing Science module are combined to foster group cohesion. The students also undergo formal evaluation with the Student Counselling and Development division and are grouped together according to a diversity of learning styles. It is understood that a variety of learning styles contributes to enhanced group cohesion and performance. Moreover, through community service learning interaction and collaboration are encouraged, as students with language and cultural differences work together in pairs to achieve their module outcomes.

The first year facilitators consequently believed that the strategic initiatives by the university and the School would be sufficient to create inclusion. Unfortunately, in the last term of 2013, conflict arose within the group of first year nursing students. This conflict had a negative impact on their academic functioning by interfering with the completion of group assignments. Feedback received from the class in the form of written reflections indicated that there was racial tension and misunderstanding within the group, for example students belonging to different heritage groups were accusing one another of being rude. With examination time approaching, the educators were concerned that the intergroup dysfunction would have a negative impact on the academic performance of the entire class. They therefore consulted with the coordinator of the *Difficult Dialogues* project at the UFS to request mediation, because it was deemed important that those involved should be objective. A session of two hours was made available for a *Difficult Dialogues* session.

A session programme was subsequently engineered to help this group of students to learn how to navigate diversity more effectively and respond to conflict in a constructive way. It was important to conduct research to determine the extent to which this learning opportunity was successful in achieving the outcomes.

2. Statement of research problem, purpose and question

In the face of disruptive intergroup conflict amongst a class of first year nursing students, the question that arose was how to best engineer learning activities for this diverse group to learn to navigate diversity and respond to conflict in a constructive way. The purpose of the research was therefore to describe the extent

to which the session contributed towards the nursing students' learning in this regard.

The research question for this study was: To what extent did the session contribute towards the nursing students' learning about navigating diversity and responding to conflict arising from diversity in a constructive way?

3. Definitions of keywords/concepts

The *Difficult Dialogues* project is an international initiative that is dedicated to the promotion of civic engagement, academic freedom and pluralism in higher education (TJCPFE, 2006). Within the context of this study the project was implemented to assist a diverse group of nursing students to establish a sense of connectedness and to explore responses to conflict arising from diversity.

Diversity within the context of this study relates to the complexity brought to every university classroom through the representation of various heritage groups; different personalities; learning styles; prior knowledge, for example perspectives, values, beliefs, attitudes; and various fields of interest (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 124; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009, pp. 11–12; Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 195; Roderick, 2008, p. 117).

Navigating, according to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, refers to finding the right way to deal with a difficult or complicated situation. Navigating within the context of this study describes the complexity that nursing students face when engaging with diversity.

Nursing students are persons undergoing education or training in nursing at an institution for nursing education and are registered with the South African Nursing Council (SANC) as a student nurse or a student midwife under section 23 of the Act No 50 of 1978 (as amended) (SANC, 1978). The participants of this study were first year undergraduate nursing students at a school of nursing.

4. Research methodology

The purpose of the study necessitated a qualitative inquiry, and a descriptive design was employed. Polit and Beck (2012, pp. 18, 505) explain that descriptive qualitative studies describe the dimensions, meanings and importance of phenomena.

The research was conducted at the School of Nursing, UFS and the population included 68 first year nursing students. As mentioned in the introduction, a variety of language and heritage groups were represented in this combined class of students. A profile of this population showed that the majority of students ($n=65$) were female, and only a small number were male ($n=3$). Comprehensive sampling, as described by McMillan and Schumacher (2010, p. 327), was applied as all the first year students were invited to participate in the session and 48 (70.6%) agreed.

The research technique used to describe to what extent the session contributed towards student learning about navigating diversity and responding to conflict arising from diversity in a constructive way, was a qualitative survey. The Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) that consists of open-ended questions was selected to capture this data. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, pp. 392–3) deem the open-ended question to be a very attractive device for smaller scale research as it catches “the authenticity, richness, depth of response, honesty and candour”, which they consider to be the hallmarks of qualitative data.

The CIQ was originally developed as a classroom evaluation tool to discover what and how students are learning (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 48). The questionnaire is, however, considered

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