Embedding Cultural Competency in First-Year Urban and Regional Planning Undergraduates.
A Practice Report

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Abstract

This practice report highlights changes made to a first-year unit in an Urban and Regional Planning degree, designed to enhance students' levels of cultural competency. We briefly discuss the history of cultural competency highlighting a lack of application in the field of urban planning. We report on a practical case study where six strategies were developed to enhance students' cultural competency. We reflect on the experience of designing and delivering a unit called Diversity and Cultural Planning. The results from 38 students who completed a cultural competency survey at the start and at the end of term, revealed an increase in overall self-assessment scores of around 12%. As cities become more diverse, this practical case study highlights the need and benefits of enhancing the cultural competency of those who both teach and learn about urban planning.

Introduction

Australia is now a multicultural society and home to people from many different countries. A rich diversity of Aboriginal groups have inhabited the country for at least 50,000 years (Burnley et al., 1997) and currently represent around 2.8% of the total population of around 25.5 million (ABS, 2017). Almost half of Australia's population (49%) were born overseas or have one or both parents born overseas (ABS, 2017). Significantly, Sandercock, (2003) has argued, "the contemporary Western city is one of capital "D" Difference" (p.276). Indeed, Seals (2018) states "the next generation of students will serve a population that rarely fits in simple boxes of culture or race" (p. 172). Given the populations in Australian cities and in university classrooms are now more diverse than ever, the cultural competency skills of planners has increased in relevance and significance. There is clearly now an urgent need to promote cultural competency in the education of urban planners at university since these will go on to ultimately design, manage and plan Australian cities and potentially others throughout the World. Universities Australia (2011, p9) have stated "all graduates from Australian universities should be culturally competent" and Edwards and Richie (2022) suggest the knowledge and application of cultural competency plays a vital role in challenging existing worldviews.

This practice report explores the changes made to a first-year unit within the Urban and Regional Planning Bachelor of Arts (BA) Honours degree at Curtin University, called *Diversity and Cultural Planning*. The changes relate to an attempt to increase the cultural competency of students within the class. The practical methods used include culturally challenging content, field trips and student self-reflections. Next, we provide a brief history of cultural competency, before discussing requirements to

deliver cultural competence at Curtin University and via the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA). Finally, we discuss the case study and provide a simple evaluation of the practices we introduced to enhance students' cultural competency.

Cultural Competency – History and Institutional Requirements

According to Doan and Lieber (2018) the idea of cultural competency can be traced to the 1930s, when the field of medicine highlighted the need to reduce cultural prejudice and embrace differences that could affect the provision of care to people of colour. In the 1950s, assimilation and the "melting pot" approach was emphasised in many colonised countries, including the US (Kohli et al., 2010) and Australia (Sandercock, 2003). The economic, cultural, and political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of the ethnic-minority perspective and public health professionals began to identify a range of environmental factors and cultural practices, which could affect health outcomes. Areas such as counselling, social service provision, psychology and social work have all attempted to improve cultural competency within their fields. Cultural pluralism in the 1980s focused more on vulnerable and oppressed groups and the significance of identity was highlighted (Harper & Lantz 1996).

Since the 1990s, perspectives have emphasised the need to respect differences and the idea of diversity has expanded beyond race, ethnicity and gender to include age, physical and mental abilities, sexual orientation, religious and political affiliation (Kohli et al., 2010). Chun and Evans (2016) suggest "cultural competence is one of the most critical skills that college graduates need for careers and citizenship in a diverse global society" (p. 7). However, urban planning has been slow in adopting pedagogical standards of cultural competency (Jackson et al., 2018). There are many definitions of cultural competence, and most focus on the capacity to work with difference. Chun and Evans (2016) define diversity competence as, "…the awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to effectively communicate, collaborate, and engage with others who are different from oneself in meaningful ways through interactions characterized by reciprocity, mutual understanding and respect" (p. 45). The literature suggests that cultural competency can be nurtured at various scales. These include the institution, the classroom and the individual.

Jackson et al. (2018) highlight the importance of the educational climate in which students study, arguing it is essential students perceive the university as an inclusive environment. Institutionally, Curtin University (2018) developed a *Diversity and Equity Strategy 2018-2020* with targets to promote awareness, capability, inclusion and leadership. Indeed, one of Curtin University's visions (2020) is to focus on the development of cultural competencies in staff and students. The University's Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) seeks to nurture respectful relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians and provides guidance on Indigenous cultural competency. Finally, the website acknowledges "Australia is a multicultural nation with a host of races and cultures. Understanding someone's cultural background is important in creating an individual who is culturally aware" (Curtin University, 2020).

Another institutional plan students are likely to engage with, is the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA). The PIA promotes student participation and to become a student member individuals require: enrolment in a degree, which leads to practice in a planning discipline or enrolment in one of the PIA accredited courses for the Urban and Regional Planning Chapter. Curtin University's BA in Urban and Regional Planning is accredited by the PIA and therefore committed to teaching cultural competency skills within its curriculum. A stated vision and aim of the PIA (2010) is, "to support the Australian planning profession and community in the creation of liveable communities, vibrant economies, sustainable places, diverse cultural expression and social cohesion" (p. 2). At the institutional level, the PIA and Curtin University clearly have a range of policy and guidance on cultural competency. Whether and how these are implemented is not known and is outside the scope of this investigation. However, cultural competency can be explored within the context of the classroom and at the individual scale.

Crucially, the classroom is where close contact with teachers and the curriculum is established and where cultural competency ideals and intentions can be explored and blossom (Kohli eta l., 2010). It should be a safe place for different views and perspectives. It has been argued, "the classroom appears to represent ground zero for building cultural competency in students" (Jackson et al., 2018, p. 130).

Individually, an important step for developing cultural competency is self-awareness (Desai et al., 2020). Indeed, "cultural competence begins with an awareness of one's own cultural beliefs and practices, and the recognition that others believe in different truths / realities than one's own" (Kohli et al., 2010, p. 257). In relation to Indigenous cultural competence, it "includes the ability to critically reflect on one's own culture and professional paradigms in order to understand its cultural limitations and effect positive change" (Universities Australia, p. 3).

Having briefly introduced the definition, history and institutional frameworks for cultural competency at Curtin University and within the PIA, we now discuss in more detail, the practical strategies we adopted at the scale of the classroom and the individual, to try to promote cultural competency in first-year urban planning undergraduates.

The Case Study

We used six approaches within the classroom/in the field to try to promote and enhance cultural competency and embed it within student learning. Firstly, we tried to create an inclusive classroom. We used physical design to modify the room and created different zones to encourage open discussion. We highlighted that for any comments made, there is never a right or wrong – just the freedom and opportunity to express and engage. The classroom was redesigned to promote comfort, interaction and inclusion. This was achieved after-hours and by arranging found-furniture, pot plants, second-hand books and artefacts in the classroom.

Secondly, following Doan and Lieber (2018), we used explicit readings and films to highlight the ways that class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, youth, ageing and Indigenous issues are linked to and affected by urban planning. For example, in terms of Indigenous content, students reviewed three thought-provoking films. These all challenge Eurocentric perspectives and beliefs. *Babakiueria* (1986) is a satirical film where roles are reversed, and white Australians watch as an Indigenous ship lands on their shores, bringing many changes. *The Coolbaroo Club* (1996) traces the history of a mixed-race club in Perth (Western Australia), which allowed Indigenous people to mix with white Australians. This film also highlighted the "red line" which, restricted Indigenous movement in the 1950s. *Immigration Nation* (2011) is a series of three films documenting the history of invasion, the development of the White Australia policy and the gradual increase in diversity witnessed in Australia due to many waves of immigration since the Second World War. Students also received a lecture from an Indigenous staff member from the Centre for Aboriginal Studies (CAS) and reviewed research papers on Indigenous issues. One assignment specifically tasked students with discussing the importance of understanding Indigenous issues in planning. Essentially, this element introduced students to different "ways of knowing" beyond the Eurocentric (Edwards & Richie, 2022).

Thirdly, one staff member conducted a self-awareness exercise and encouraged the students to reflect upon their own sense of identity. We developed a "Who am I?" exercise to explore identity, building on Weaver's (1986) concept of the iceberg to explain the seen and unseen elements to culture. Parts of culture (around 10%) are "above water", they are visible and easy to identify, while the majority (90%) is hidden. The staff member looked back at their family heritage, noting English, Welsh and Irish roots – and highlighting large gaps throughout the generations, where the heritage was missing and unknown. The staff member reflected on their journey as an immigrant and then as a citizen of Australia. In the exercise, the staff member reflected on their previous and current prejudices (e.g., against wealthy / affluent people, people of colour, people of diverse sexual orientation, people with disabilities and Indigenous Australians) and on when / how they were confronted and changed. We encouraged the students to explore their own identities and prejudices.

Fourthly, students were given a role-playing conflict resolution exercise to consider and to debate. The scenario was a proposal to develop a mosque in a fictitious suburb experiencing rapid change from a predominantly white, largely Christian neighbourhood to one dominated by a more ethnically diverse population of largely Muslim residents. Students were required to role play in groups, and advocate against *and* for the development of the Mosque, using planning concepts such as equity, sense of place, community, fairness, heritage, diversity, inclusivity and multiculturalism to justify their position.

Fifthly, students participated in data collection during field trips. The field-trip document included questions on self-reflection, the physical environment, the behaviours of people, the thoughts of other students and power relations. The document included very specific self-reflection questions and promoted social learning using student interaction and mock social surveys, where skills of qualitative analysis are engendered. This also explored identity.

Finally, three highly focused assignments were developed for the unit. The first assignment was an essay on the importance of Indigenous issues to planning. This was designed to build on the knowledge, which emerged from the films, reading and lectures from an Indigenous member of staff. The second assignment was a tutorial booklet, which recorded notes taken from key literature, films and reflections on key concepts and ideas, discussed in class. Importantly, one of the reflections was on the perceived level of cultural competency (see below). The final assignment was based on the fieldtrips and fieldwork. It included a comparison with a recent cultural development plan for the city using the data collected on the presence or absence of indicators for culture and diversity.

Earlier, the need for more culturally competency in urban planning was highlighted in an increasingly diverse world. Above, we briefly explored what was done and how it was delivered. Having established why, how and what was done, a final strategy was required to try to evaluate whether cultural competency levels had increased or not. Numerous iterations of cultural competency surveys have been produced and we adapted several (e.g., Mason, 1995) to simply measure perceived levels of cultural competency. The students were asked to answer truthfully, statements about how they deal with difference, discrimination and diversity. They were also asked to reflect on the differences between their scores in Week 1, as compared to Week 12. The process and results of the self-reflection survey are discussed below.

Cultural Competency Self-Reflection Survey Findings

In 2021, 38 students completed a survey on their perceived cultural competency at the start of the semester and again at the end. The survey asked the students to rank the frequency of their behaviour (from 1 "almost never" to 5 "always") in relation to 20 statements about dealing with difference, discrimination and diversity. With these self-reflection surveys, the results indicate where the students place themselves for each of the cultural differences. The students are self-reporting and only to themselves. The anonymous survey results were then pooled for teaching staff to interpret and reflect upon. Table 1 lists the twenty statements with responses from Week 1 compared to those in Week 12 with % change reported in the final column.

Overall, the average % Cultural Competency score for all the students increased by around 12%, from 75% to 85%. The largest increases related to statements about making assumptions about people, offensive jokes, connecting with difference and calling out discrimination (e.g., statements 3 (+29%), 5 (+25%), 14 (18%), 1 (+17%) and 2 (+17%)).

Table 1

Cultural Competency Survey Results

Please reflect on these statements Rank your answer from 1 (almost never) to 5 (always)	Score Wk1	Score Wk12	% Change
1. I challenge others when they make racial / ethnic / sexually offensive comments or jokes	3.1	3.6	+17.0
2. I speak up if I witness another person being humiliated or discriminated against	3.4	3.9	+16.9
3. I do not participate in jokes that are derogatory to any group(s)	2.8	3.6	+28.6
4. I realize that people of other cultures need to connect as a group	4.3	4.6	+6.7
5. I do not make assumptions about a person or group until I have verified the facts on my own	3.3	4.1	+25.0
6. I understand how knowledge about gender is important to planning	3.7	4.3	+16.6
7. I connect easily with people who do not look like me	3.9	4.2	+7.3
8. I'm interested in the ideas and beliefs of people who don't think and believe as I do	3.9	4.2	+7.5
9. I understand how knowledge about aging is important to planning	3.9	4.4	+13.0
10. I know the stereotype of my ethnicity	4.3	4.6	+7.1
11. I understand how knowledge about ethnicity is important to planning	4.1	4.6	+12.4
12. I avoid assuming that others will have the same reaction as me when discussing or viewing an issue	3.6	3.9	+10.7
13. I understand how knowledge about Indigenous people is important to planning	4.1	4.6	+11.1
14. I actively seek opportunities to connect with people who are different than me	3.0	3.5	+17.5
15. I understand how knowledge about disadvantaged groups is important to planning	4.0	4.5	+12.1
16. I try to learn about and appreciate the richness of other cultures	3.8	4.2	+11.4
17. I believe there are policies / practices that negatively impact people outside the dominant culture	4.0	4.5	+11.9
18. I understand how knowledge about disability is important to planning	4.3	4.5	+4.0
19. I know and accept that a person's experiences and background impacts how they interact and trust me	4.0	4.3	+7.2
20. I can honestly assess my strengths and weaknesses in the area of diversity and try to improve myself	3.9	4.3	+11.1
Total % Cultural Competence Score	**75.4**	**84.6**	**+12.2**

There were sizable improvements in students' understanding of the importance of knowledge about gender (6, +17%), ethnicity (11, +12%), socioeconomically disadvantaged groups (15, +12%), Indigenous people (13, 11%), and disability (18, +4%). Finally, connecting with people who are different (7, +7%), interest in the ideas and beliefs of others (8, 8%) and seeking opportunities to connect with different "others" (14, 18%) all increased. Below are some of the comments students made when asked to reflect on their two cultural competency scores:

> I think the literature, films and lectures have made me experience different cultures and issues. (Student 2)

> I have opened my eyes to difference. (Student 8).

Reflections on the conflict resolution exercise also provided interesting insights. One commented:

> Personally, the conflict resolution exercise was the highlight of the unit. (Student 4)

> I really enjoyed the conflict resolution exercise. It made me enjoy the class more and it was a fun activity. (Student 27)

Survey Results Strengths and Limitations

Although all the students in the class completed the survey, the survey population is small, and the results cannot be considered scientific or representative. That said, the results are to some extent, indicative of the teaching and learning effectiveness within the unit. The percentage change is simply comparing before and after results as perceived by the students. As an aid to learning, the before and after results offer the students a useful structure to express their thoughts and reflections. Overall, the results yielded some poignant reflections among many students, but not all. It is also a useful tool for reflective teaching practice, for the teaching team to ponder and respond to. As a teaching aid the survey results provide a perspective on where the content and delivery mode could be strengthened to enhance the desired outcomes. For example, disability differences registered the lowest positive change (+4%) and for the teaching team, has prompted refinements in content and teaching strategies.

Although the cultural competency self-assessment survey is highly subjective, most students did register an increase in scores. A small minority registered a decrease in overall scores, and interestingly, these students noted themselves, that they may had overestimated their cultural competency in the first test. This acknowledgment that they did not understand enough about cultural competency to accurately report what they did not know, is an inherent weakness with the before and after survey approach. Indeed, the literature has long recognised the limitations of self-assessments of cultural competency (Ruben, 1989). For example, if respondents believe their results could adversely impact how they are perceived by a teacher or their peers, it is less likely their views will be candid and honest. Although this self-assessment survey minimised this problem by being anonymous, it can nevertheless remain an influencing factor.

Conclusion

This practice report has highlighted the need and benefits of improving cultural competency within the field of urban planning. This exploratory research has highlighted a range of strategies applied to the unit *Diversity and Cultural Planning*, designed to enhance students' levels of cultural competency. Earlier, we discussed the six strategies used to change the unit to enhance cultural competency. Although we do see these "how to strategies" as a contribution that could help others respond to the same kind of institutional drivers for teaching cultural competency, it is less clear as to what extent each of these strategies may have affected students' self-reported levels. That said, the data from the two cultural competency surveys do suggests that levels did indeed increase. Overall, it appears that the strategies adopted in this unit have made a useful contribution to enhancing the cultural competency of the first-year urban planning students in this unit.

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