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In Conversation Together: Student Ambassadors for Cultural Competence

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IN CONVERSATION TOGETHER: STUDENT AMBASSADORS FOR CULTURAL COMPETENCE

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The Students as Partners Initiative: What We Were Hoping to Achieve

Amani and Tai: We're academic developers interested in working in partnership with students. In 2014, we trialled partnership through working with six Student Ambassadors as part of the Sydney Teaching Colloquium. The Colloquium is the university's annual teaching conference and usually draws around 300 participants, mainly academics, to discuss teaching and curriculum practices. The theme of the 2014 Colloquium was 'Is our assessment up to standard?' The Student Ambassadors:

- developed a social media campaign to engage the Sydney student community in the Colloquium;
- designed a session on assessment to present at the Colloquium;
- devised and executed a Colloquium evaluation strategy;
- curated and developed resources; and
- contributed to the planning and writing of a co-authored journal publication (Peseta et al., 2016).

The experiences and outcomes from the trial gave us courage to try again and so the following year, we engaged another six Student Ambassadors for the 2015 Colloquium. This time the theme was 'Cultural competence is everyone's business,' which linked with the university's new strategic focus on cultural competence (The University of Sydney Strategic Plan, 2016-2020).

We followed the 2014 model described in Peseta et al. (2016), where students were selected via an expression of interest and interview process. We were mainly looking for undergraduate students interested in learning about cultural competence (CC), who could see the relevance of CC to students' experiences of university more broadly and had creative ideas about how to do it, and who wanted to develop their knowledge of university CC

initiatives. The students were paid for their time spent as an ambassador, which involved approximately 40 hours of face-to-face meetings, preparation, participation in the Colloquium, and a post-Colloquium focus group over 3-4 months.

Introducing the Students

Longen: While I get the best of both worlds, combining the 25+ contact hours of Science and the 25+ hours of reading of Law, I am also fortunate enough to experience how cultural competence applies to two diverse areas of study, whether through teaching or through interactions between the students themselves. As a Student Ambassador I wanted to explore how students of all different cultural backgrounds view how cultural competence is integrated into their university experience. I have a Chinese heritage; however, I was born in Thailand, and lived there for 12 years before moving to Australia for high school and university study. I aimed to represent as many students as possible and share their views, feedback and questions with the academics at the Colloquium.

Rosie: I'm studying a Bachelor of Advanced Science majoring in neuroscience and immunology. I have plans to do Honours in immunology and then medicine. I applied to become an ambassador because of the theme: cultural competence. Cultural awareness is something I want to develop in myself and it is important for the university. I am interested in participating in events designed to lift the quality of teaching and learning at our university and to contribute to our collective understanding of cultural competence. I think this issue is incredibly complicated and difficult for a huge organisation like the university to tackle, and the university will benefit from student involvement.

Suji: I am a Commerce/Arts student, currently majoring in American Studies and Marketing. The theme of the colloquium, cultural competence, resonates with me on a personal level. It is humbling to know that our university works hard to improve our learning experiences. This relevant topic relates to everyone and involves everyone. I was keen to be a Student Ambassador because I'm eager to provide my own voice, as well as to try and deliver a broader student voice for my peers.

Stephanie: I am a Bachelor of Arts student majoring in history. I feel very fortunate to be part of the Student Ambassador program that allows a student like me to provide a voice on the important issue of cultural competence. Being a history student, I have learned that active voices have the chance to imagine or create necessary and effective change for the better, whether big or small. As a result, I aimed to make a positive contribution to the Sydney Teaching Colloquium.

Tracy: I am currently a Commerce (Liberal Studies) student. I am majoring in marketing, business information systems, and psychology. I have always been very involved with my community and volunteering. I decided to get involved with the Colloquium because I believe that cultural competence is essential to everything we do. Promoting the importance and value of culture and diversity is something I love being a part of, especially in the wider university context.

Ann: I believe that discussion and debate about cultural competence is key to social progress. Becoming self-aware and drawing connections between our worldview and others' is genuinely formative and significant. I got involved because I wanted to learn about how

education can be harnessed to influence thinking, structurally and socially. It is incredibly important that people be allowed to be free thinkers but to also make sure that that freethinking is also critical and culturally competent.

How We Worked Together

Amani and Tai: During the three meetings before the Colloquium, we spent a lot of time exploring CC. We arranged 4-5 meetings—sometimes a couple of hours, sometimes whole days—to work out precisely how we wanted to approach the issue of CC. Below are some of the topics we discussed at our first meeting together, which was designed to invite students to see CC from a range of perspectives:

- Student ambassadors' own experiences of CC
- Other students' experiences of CC
- Models of CC from the research
- Lecturers' decision-making about embedding CC into their curriculum
- How can a complex organization—like this university—with 5,000+ staff; 50,000+ students; 16 faculties across disciplines and professions address CC seriously?
- What is the University of Sydney already doing?

Below are some of the topics we discussed at our second meeting:

- Mapping CC in your degree/experience at university: diagnosis and improvement
- Three concepts: unconscious bias, (white) privilege, and critical reflection
- What is culturally competent teaching?

The initial meetings we had together allowed us to raise, probe, and recognise a range of difficult issues that we learned emerge in discussions about CC. We talked a lot about our own cultural backgrounds and the assumptions people make regarding our skills and abilities based on what we look like. We tried as best we could to acknowledge our own biases and prejudices. We searched online to locate images that represented our feelings about CC and to find information about how the university was meeting its commitments to CC. We talked openly about our experiences of learning in tutorials and seminars and how CC could be a helpful lens to interpret those experiences.

In our second set of meetings together, we took what we had learned and made plans for representing the complexity of CC at the Colloquium. We borrowed the main activity from a [Buzzfeed video](#) called a Privilege Line to creatively tell the Sydney student story about CC. Focused on the intersections between race, class and privilege, the activity invites people to respond to a set of statements that enable them to determine and compare their level of privilege in relation to others. Our ambassadors developed 'Walking the line,' an adaptation of the Privilege Line focused on CC. They created their own provocative statements about CC and planned a personal anecdote or story acquired through speaking with other students to illustrate the difficulty of CC. They also linked these personal experiences with findings from the research. These meetings were essential in helping all of us to comprehend how to come to grips with the complexity of CC.

At the Colloquium: The Experience of ‘Walking the Line’

Amani and Tai: At the Colloquium in November 2015, the students presented their experiences of cultural competence at the university. ‘Walking the line’ was a powerful visual and experiential performance demonstrating the dangers of leaving cultural competence in the curriculum to chance. You can view the [entire presentation here](#) (the line performance starts at 6 minutes).

The line served as a powerful prompt for students and academics to reflect on their learning and teaching practices, and on their own cultural identities. It was a very different way of sharing students’ experiences, and such moments of surprise—which Ursula Lucas calls being ‘pulled up short’ (2008)—can be powerful for challenging assumptions.

Stephanie: If we hadn’t rehearsed the line I think I would have been a lot more nervous considering the audience. They [academics at the Colloquium] could have easily judged us by what we were disclosing about ourselves because it was very personal.

Suji: I think when we introduced ourselves it was like, ‘Oh yeah, the students are coming to do their part and this is nice,’ and then to suddenly do the line, where it was like ‘please take us seriously,’ the silence in the room was quite resounding. I think the impact was very strong and so afterwards when we gave our recommendations it was like ‘don’t dismiss us because we’re students.’

Ann: Being able to do the line in front of a group of academics that were generally interested and came up to us later and said, ‘You’ve changed our view on cultural competence’—it transformed our negative experiences about cultural competence at the university into something practical.

The Students’ Colloquium Message: Recommendations about Cultural Competence

Stephanie, Suji, Longen, Rosie, Tracy, and Ann: At a session at the conclusion of the Colloquium, we presented our recommendations about how the university can better address cultural competence:

- Students should be supported to develop cultural competence in several ways: embedded in the structure of the degree; through assessment; through learning activities (e.g. well-facilitated group work); and through elective units.
- Need to avoid a curriculum scenario where a student could complete their degree without having any opportunities to develop cultural competence.
- Students also develop cultural competence via co-curricular experiences and may need help navigating the wealth of offerings.
- Faculties and the university need to do a better job of communicating about cultural competence initiatives, especially to students.
- Students are keen to be involved in working in partnership with staff to grow cultural competence initiatives.

We also gathered feedback from Colloquium participants via an online survey and we were thrilled that 85% agreed or strongly agreed that they would aim to implement what they learned at the Colloquium in their teaching (n=95). Comments included statements such as:

“The student ambassadors were fantastic! They motivated me to have conversations with my students about cultural awareness.”

In Conversation Together: On Students-as-Partners in Developing Cultural Competence

Beyond the ‘Student’ Role

Amani and Tai: We noticed that the Student Ambassadors shifted into a role that took them beyond being ‘student.’ They were able to act as mediators between students’ experiences of learning and the challenges academics encounter in discussing how to embed cultural competence in their curriculum and teaching.

Ann: Learning is not one sided; it’s teachers and students engaging in dialogue. It’s not like you just learn from teachers. They can learn from you and it doesn’t have to be limited to what a syllabus says.

Rosie: I loved having academics seek my opinion. It made me feel valued as a student. I loved being able to talk to people who are passionate about the topic. It often feels that some academics don’t care too much about the student experience, which I know is probably not true, but actually seeing a group of academics get together and talk about the student experience and ask our opinions made me feel that the student experience was something that was valued by the university. I don’t generally feel that students are included in that conversation so it was really great to be able to influence what was going on in the university I attend.

The Challenge of Engaging Students

Tai: In 2014, one challenge the ambassadors raised was the importance of greater student participation in the Colloquium. This was also an issue in 2015. It begs the question: how can we make the Colloquium space more welcoming for students so that they feel the conversation is on a level playing field?

Tracy: Sometimes the conversation at the Colloquium was at quite a high level, so it was sometimes difficult for us to engage. I felt like most of the talks weren’t aimed at students. Friends looked at the program and they were like: ‘I don’t really feel like there’s anything I would take away from that.’ There does need to be things that students see and go, ‘Yes I can see how I can benefit from hearing that.’

Tai: It also raises the possibility of whether we should have a day for students and a day for academics to make the program more understandable.

Ann: Segregating students from academics would be detrimental because I think it’s a very valuable exchange. I don’t want to argue against the whole idea of trying to target more students but I think in terms of facilitating conversation it’s great to get students and academics together.

Longen: We just have to find a way to make it a bit more engaging for students. Of course,

there are slightly different interests between the academics and the students and that's always going to be a challenge. However, I'm sure that there will be sessions where both audiences can be engaged.

Understanding the University: What Academics Do

Tracy: What surprised me most was what was happening behind the scenes that the students are not aware of. During our earlier sessions, we were kind of like – ‘Oh well, the faculties aren't doing anything’ but there are things happening behind the scenes and academics actually care more than we think they do. It's just not as transparent as it could be and I think it's important for students to know what's going on so that they can take on more active roles.

Rosie: I spoke to a tutor who told me he felt a little bit duped by our talk because he has 18 hours with his students for a semester. While he thinks cultural competence is really important, how is he expected to do that in 18 hours when the first 5 hours you don't even know them and most of the rest of the time is preparing for assessments and so on? He has such a small window in which to make an impact on students. Hearing the personal experiences of teachers who are frustrated by the university system made me realize they value cultural competence as well.

Ann: I had a teacher come up to me to say that she identified with everything we said except in the opposite direction. As a tutor, she would like students to also check themselves and rectify culturally inappropriate comments because it's not as if the students are the only ones who are culturally diverse. It's everyone's business. Hearing the teachers' perspectives made us think about ourselves and the ways we act in regards to the whole of society. I think it's so important to hear all sides of the story and at the Colloquium I felt like I was exposed to lots of different perspectives.

Tai: I think the focus on students in this space is absolutely crucial. But if culture is something that sits between the teacher and the student, the teacher can't be the only one responsible for everything that happens in that classroom. If it's a dialogue between people, there's got to be space for that negotiation: as much as the teacher has to recognize the student, the students have to recognize the teacher.

Cultural Competence Is ‘Close to Home’

Amani and Tai: While the 2014 Student Ambassadors were engaged and even passionate at times about the topic of assessment, the 2015 theme of cultural competence saw a personal investment and discussion about identities that we didn't observe in 2014.

Stephanie: The theme of cultural competence is close to home. I'm a first-in-family student and I come from a low socio-economic background. So when I read the position description I thought this is my chance to give my opinion on what the university isn't doing for students like myself who have been marginalised in various ways because of their backgrounds.

Longen: Cultural competence connected with me on a personal level. I was born in Thailand and I lived there for 12 years but I identify as a Chinese person. It wasn't the easiest

transition to Australia but it's such a multi-cultural society that I felt that it was not too difficult to eventually integrate into society quite well. Having experienced that, I believe that in university this can also happen for students from different cultures.

Ann: Personally, I find that culture is constantly at the forefront of my mind in terms of identity. We live in a society with lots of different cultures, which means we often have to question and examine the ways that we think and our worldview. This questioning means that culture is something really significant and constant. I saw the Colloquium as a great opportunity to discuss cultural competence and create some structural changes in the university that can facilitate greater discussion and greater empathy.

Rosie: I feel I have had a fairly uni-cultural experience, going to a very homogenous school, living in a very homogenous area. I feel like I'm missing out on some of the experiences that have defined the other ambassadors and it's something I'd like to work on so that I'm more culturally aware.

Tracy: I felt like I didn't know much about cultural competence because before coming to university I never took an active role in being more culturally aware. I've never really thought about it deeply. When I saw that the Colloquium was based on cultural competence, I felt like this was a good opportunity for me to learn more about what's going on and contribute my own opinion.

Personal Transformation

Suji: The ambassador experience was something really unique. It was an interesting opportunity and I wouldn't have thought that I could be part of something like this. It was a new experience that I'd definitely recommend for all of my friends to try as well.

Ann: The process was quite reflective and I feel I'm better equipped to hold a conversation with people about cultural competence.

Tracy: This experience made me realise how much culture affected my upbringing and who I am as a person. Because I've never really paid attention to that—I guess I was quite removed from my culture—but I've started to realise that it has quite a big impact on who I am now.

Amani: The experience had been personally transformative for me. I always find working in partnership with students to be rewarding and energising. The 2015 Student Ambassadors brought lots of ideas and enthusiasm, were willing to learn, to work hard, and try out new things. How much the students fit into their lives amazed me—we obviously attracted a very high-achieving group. I feel like the future is in safe hands! I continue to wonder about ways to extend these types of experiences to more students—six out of 50,000+ students is a very small group.

Where To Next?

Tai: In my experience, many of the students keen to take part in these partnership initiatives are typically aware of the transformative potential of universities and are eager to support

institutional efforts at improvement. This group of Student Ambassadors was no different. All six were passionate about cultural competence for different reasons. Some were seeking an experience that put them into direct contact with those different from them; others were committed to getting involved in social justice advocacy owing to their own trajectory in university; others could see that the university could do more as part of its responsibility as Australia's first university. Whatever the reason, these particular ambassadors have raised awareness about how partnership with students leads to more sophisticated outcomes.

Amani: While the project was transformative for the students involved and for many of the academics that attended the Colloquium, we didn't manage to engage much of the larger student body or to get students more involved at a structural level. We are currently working with a new group of Student Ambassadors on projects to embed cultural competence in particular units of study with one of the 2015 ambassadors acting as a mentor to the new group. We think this will have more impact and we are hoping that if it is successful we will have a better case for further initiatives across the university.

Tracy: If we want to do something about cultural competence, it needs to be a two-way conversation. Students need to be active in whole process as well as academics being active in communicating with students. It needs to be a collaboration.

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