What is the pedagogic response to increased cultural diversity amongst student cohorts?

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Introduction

The aim of this working paper is to assess the methods of pedagogy offered by staff and received by students in the area of HRD on postgraduate programmes. It is intended that this research will include academic staff and the extent to which their methods and techniques of teaching encompass diverse cultural backgrounds, to what extent staff discard their own values, impose their own values or compromise and improvise (Francis 2001). From the point of view of the student whether there are strong culturally based expectations of teaching techniques or is it more a case of compromise given multicultural cohorts.

As with many higher educational establishments in the UK the student cohort to be studied in this case is represented by a culturally diverse membership as they are completing a full time postgraduate diploma in Human Resource Management and Development. Academic staff are predominantly from the UK with one member of staff from China.

The student cohort is studying the MSc in International Human Resource Management and Development programme at Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University. This has been chosen as the cohort consists of 15 to 20 students per academic year and is represented by students from a variety of nationalities and therefore national cultures.

Methodological issues and data collection are a main point for discussion for this working/developmental paper and the issues are discussed in section two with discussion around developmental questions planned for the presentation.

Literature

The ambiguity of the concept of culture raises debates and issues in the literature relating to; the concept of national culture, convergence or divergence of cultures and the effects of acculturation and these influence the ability to explain and predict behaviour (Thomas 2008b)

Moreover there is a myriad of definitions of culture. Culture is an invisible process that goes on throughout our life; cultural beliefs and practices are so familiar to us that principles and interpretations are taken for granted and we believe that ‘our’ way of doing things is the ‘right’ way, a perspective known as ethnocentrism (Ryan 2000; Cortazzi and Jin 1997)

Geert Hofstede (1980, 1986, 1991), argues in favour of national culture as they are social systems and can have cultures consisting of factors such as government, legal systems, languages, education and so on and moreover he argues that these factors lead to mental programming in the way that people interact with their environment and each other. Far more emotively he argues that nationality has a symbolic value to citizens that influence how we perceive ourselves (Thomas, 2008b). He analysed cultural data, compiling a data bank of employee attitudes in IBM and culminating in five work related dimensions; individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity and long term- short term orientation

Francis (2001) compared two of Hofstede’s dimensions; power distance and uncertainty avoidance with training techniques thus considering the cultural relativity
of training techniques and what can be determined to make these techniques more appropriate and effective given cultural diversity.

The power distance dimension refers to the degree of separation between people belonging to different social status and the extent to which the different members of society accept an unequal distribution of power whilst the dimension of uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which members of a society feel threatened by unstructured or unpredictable situations.

In an educational context those countries with a low power distance (less acceptance of unequal distribution of power) reflected cultural attitudes where students and staff expect a more equal relationship. “Students are expected to find their own intellectual paths, students make uninvited interventions in class, they are supposed to ask questions when they do not understand something. They argue with teachers, express disagreement and criticisms in front of the teacher.” (Hofstede 1991: 34)

In relation to the dimension of uncertainty avoidance in an educational context, for example countries like Germany with a strong uncertainty avoidance favoured “structured learning situations with precise objectives, detailed arrangements and strict timetables, they like situations in which there is one correct answer which they can find” whereas most British participants on the other hand despise too much structure with open ended learning situations and vague objectives and broad assignments. The suggestion that there could only be one correct answer doesn’t strike accord in the UK. This was typical for those cultures with weak uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede 1991:119)

Francis juxtaposed a spectrum of training techniques from didactic techniques to experiential techniques with Hofstede’s dimensions; didactic with high power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance and experiential with low power distance and weak uncertainty avoidance with predictions for appropriate training techniques for different cultural groups. For example “that someone attempting a fish bowl exercise in a Latin culture is most likely to meet with some resistance and withdrawal whilst “living and working in Denmark, I often observed that lectures quickly turned into discussion groups as participants readily challenged the lecturer”. (Francis 2001:194)

Weech, refers to adaptation of the educator from low power distance to high power distance cultures by making status and expertise well known to the students as they “like to be assured that the trainer really is an expert” and that “participants didn’t pay attention when small groups of students were asked to present findings or solutions to a task set as they didn’t value the ideas of their peers” (Weech 2001:62.) To adjust to the difference each small group of participants reported directly to the member of staff and then a summary of each of the small groups’ work was presented to the class “with rapt attention”( Weech 2001:62)

The UK has a low power distance so that expectations of the learning environment lean more to participative pedagogic styles with reasonably equal relationships, so that this is less likely to be expected or acceptable if a student comes from a high power distance culture.
When adapting from a culture with weak uncertainty avoidance to one with strong uncertainty avoidance there should be a well defined structure to the session and not an emergent one and this should be linked to precise learning objectives (Weech 2001)

One viewpoint states that academics have little knowledge of educational practices other than their own, believing that their approach is better than others (Vandermensbrughe 2004) and another viewpoint linking to ethnocentricism states “Academic staff interviewed seemed wholly unaware of any ethnocentrism in their teaching. They considered students’ problems to be at the surface level of the language, concerned with vocabulary, spelling, grammar and syntax. There was no mention of the cultural assumptions built into the structure of knowledge put over in their courses” (Barker 1991: 111). Cortazzi and Jin (1997) conceptualise cultural influences in a pedagogic context into; academic culture, communication culture and learning culture which can enable staff and students to overcome barriers to understanding each others’ cultures. However across theory, policy and practice in both a management context and moreover an educational and pedagogical context is that of the pervasive levels of western or even Anglophonic influence (Dimmock and Walker 2000; Begley 2002; Dimmock 2002; Heck 2002; Shah 2003).

Whether staff are aware, understand and can apply the appropriate pedagogic methods is almost subservient to their willingness to compromise or adapt given levels of ethnocentricity or whether they feel that it is the institution they work for that should be overcoming any problems or issues arising from a lack of understanding because of differing expectations of pedagogic methods or environments.

**Method**

Firstly it is intended to focus on the student cohort, student numbers are not known at this stage until next academic year. In previous years it has consisted of around 15 to 20 students. The 2008/09 cohort had 17 students from England, Malaysia, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Taiwan, Libya and Egypt.

It is intended to undertake a focus group interview of around 6 to 8 students. This will be to enable and record interactive discussion across students from different cultures within the cohort. Focus grouping has been selected to capture the cultural dynamism through interaction exploring the juxtaposition of the spectrum of training techniques from didactic to experiential (Francis 2001) with the dimensions of power distance and uncertainty avoidance in order to attempt to learn about cultural expectations pedagogically. The focus group allows an adoption of an interview based strategy that can be more easily related to the clearly defined population of this student cohort. Members of the group will be encouraged to interact and respond, maintaining the focus on culture bound pedagogic expectations.

The essence of focus groups are broadly located within the interpretive research paradigm where qualitative approaches focus on subjective perceptions of individuals with consequent concerns for the meanings or interpretations placed on events by researcher and researched (Morrison 2002; Bush2003 cited in Thomas 2008a)

Focus groups, when distinguished from other forms of group interviews are defined as “a group of people brought together to participate in the discussion of interest.
The focus group discussion aims to provide an environment in which all members of the group can discuss the area of investigation with each other. A successful focus group discussion has the group members involved as participants in discussing the area of interest. They may argue with each other, try to persuade each other of their point of view, agree or disagree, ask each other questions and generally discuss the topic in an open and friendly way. This results in a broad breadth of discussion as well as discussion in depth. The direction of interaction is between each group participant (including the moderator) and each of the other group participants individually or collectively” Boddy (2005)

However Thomas (2008a) argues “For the researcher in a mono- or cross-cultural setting, the implications of these qualitative approaches are profound, as the researcher’s own cultural values and educational histories have persistent, pervasive effects on what they find worth studying and how they choose to study it’(Smith, Bond, and Kagitcibasi 2006: 9) as well as how data are collected, analysed and disseminated (Walker and Dimmock 2000; Schaffer and Riordan 2003; Shah 2003). Objectively, implying neutrality and detachment is not possible in such a context (Shah 2003). Therefore, in order to avoid Anglophonic or ethnocentric values seen as pervasive across theory, policy and practice (Dimmock and Walker 2000; Begley 2002; Dimmock 2002; Heck 2002; Shah 2003), it is argued researchers, research paradigms and the tools employed within those paradigms must be culturally and contextually sensitive and appropriate (See also reference to this in a pedagogical context in the literature section of this paper).

Focus group interviews as the preferred research method for this study needs acknowledgement to be made to the differing cultural expectations of a multi cultural group, the choice of a focus group is made for reasons stated above but may provide issues when dealing with students from a variety of multi cultural backgrounds. Building on Thomas’s (2008a) argument regarding the researchers’ own cultural values students from high power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance cultures may not be able or wish to portray themselves and interact or argue as the researcher would like. Thus positing thought about adaptation of this method or using a supportive method in conjunction with the focus group interviews of the students.

Therefore it could be considered more appropriate to support focus group interviews with individual interviews with students from high power distance cultures (Stokes and Bergin 2006) which can also help overcome any paucity or deficiency of information due to the usage of an experiential form of interaction and issues that may arise from the use of this method on students with cultural backgrounds where experiential style sessions aren’t so acceptable and therefore may not be so effective. Therefore as participants’ views may tend towards ‘polarization’ (Morgan 1996) or consensus rather than expression of ‘true’ individual viewpoints (Thomas 2008a) individual interviews could also be undertaken with students.

The second focus is on academic staff and their expectations of students, knowledge of differing learning cultures and the challenges teaching diverse groups create focusing on the use of the pedagogical methods(Francis 2001:193)
It is intended to carry out one to one semi structured interviews with 3 or 4 academic staff teaching on the programme. These are intended to explore the reflection on pedagogic methods and issues as juxtaposed and categorised by Francis on Hofstede’s dimensions of power distance and uncertainty avoidance and to relate to the cultural viewpoints of the academic staff and the cultural synergy with students from multifarious nationalities.

References


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