A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY – DEVELOPING AN ONLINE LEARNING PROGRAM FOR CROSS-CULTURAL AWARENESS

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Abstract

This paper outlines the process involved in designing and developing an online staff development resource in cross-cultural awareness. The project serves as an example of collaboration between the central Human Resources department, and educational and technical staff within the Flexible Learning Unit at Griffith University.

Keywords
Cross-cultural awareness, staff development, reflective learning, constructivist learning, accessibility

Introduction

Please Explain: Indirect Discrimination in the Workplace is the title of a collaborative project undertaken by the Office of Human Resource Management (OHRM) and Flexible Learning & Access Services (FLAS) at Griffith University, aimed at producing a staff development resource to raise awareness of cross-cultural issues. The program is specifically for use by supervisors and managers working with Indigenous Australian staff but holds wider benefit and interest for those wanting to learn more about cultural interaction or who work with people from cultures and backgrounds other than their own.

Members of the team involved in this initiative have often described this as 'the project that keeps on giving'. In addition to the important and stimulating nature of the content itself, this project has been characterised by highly effective collaboration between the University's Equity team, the Project Coordinator and the design and development team within the flexible learning unit. It also serves as an example of a multimedia resource that is accessible to participants with disabilities or restricted access to technology.

This paper describes the context of the project, as having arisen from Griffith University's Indigenous Employment Strategy, and discusses the rationale behind the reflective learning model used to inform the design of activities and interactions contained throughout the resource. It also describes some of the key learning that emerged as a result of the collaborative process.

Context: Griffith University's Indigenous Employment Strategy

In 1995 Griffith University commenced a five year Recruitment and Career Development Strategy for Indigenous Australians. A key strategy in that program was to establish a cross-cultural awareness program sensitising University staff to employment matters for Indigenous Australians. The implementation plan suggested that an Indigenous Australian Cross-Cultural Awareness Program should

be developed and included in the Staff Development Training Program, coordinated by the Office of Human Resource Management.

The realities of developing, implementing and sustaining such a program meant that factors that operate in any large organisation, and particularly an educational institution where flexibility in releasing staff is limited, were particularly problematic:

1. It is very difficult to get staff to be released for block workshops, and availability is liable to change without warning.
2. Workshops are dependent on continued availability of presenters with necessary experience and expertise.
3. Staff awareness programs are best delivered in a "just in time" approach, when issues are pertinent and real. This mitigates against a workshop approach, which requires considerable forward planning and organisation.
4. Effective cross-cultural awareness programs require considerable self-analysis of attitudes and values, which can be confronting to some individuals.
5. Cross-cultural awareness programs, by their very nature, need to be inclusive of a range of learning styles and individuals' prior knowledge, experience and understanding of the issues involved.

In relation to point 4, Kohls (1995) states,

> It is our ethnocentrism – and all people are equally ethnocentric – that makes us think our own culture is superior and all others inferior, that our ways of doing things are inherently better than anyone else's. …Today, every major practitioner (in intercultural training) begins with generic training, to make the trainees aware of their own ethnocentrism and their enculturation into their own culture, while at the same time others have been enculturated into very different cultures. (pp.25, 26)

In their essay on Diversity and Difference Training in the United States, published in Sims and Dennehy (1993) Sims and Sims make the point that such training is more than realising the superficial differences represented by race, gender and age.

> It involves learning about the complex social-psychological processes, and it encourages participants to identify their own values, beliefs and attitudes. (p.74)

In the same volume Schor makes the point that Diversity teaching and training programs should foster understanding and appreciation of culturally difference.

> This involves the difficult task of changing peoples attitudes, values and behaviours and is facilitated by increasing self-awareness and learning more about people of different cultural backgrounds. (p.149)

Informed by these factors, a task group consisting of four staff in the Office of HRM, two indigenous and two non-indigenous, commenced work on the project. It was decided that the most enduring resource that could be developed would be a video and accompanying workbook/activities that would enable either individuals or groups of staff to work through the issues that needed to be addressed when confronting indirect discrimination in the workplace. Indigenous Australian cultures were to be the focus of both the video and the ensuing activities. A search of available resources indicated that there was nothing commercially available that suited the needs of the project, and it was determined that developing a custom made product would produce the best outcomes.

One of the key learning principles and misconceptions that was to be addressed through the learning materials was that of underestimating the abilities of indigenous people. The task group canvassed a number of Indigenous people prior to developing the learning package, to determine the key issues to be addressed. It was deemed important by the task group that wherever possible the work of the project should be undertaken by indigenous groups or individuals, debunking the misperception by example.

Scripts for the video scenarios were prepared by the task group members, and combined both indigenous and non-indigenous perceptions. The process of sharing perceptions about each other's cultures was the

first of much deep learning experienced by those involved in the project. Assumptions held were explored, and formed the basis of the scenes shown in the video.
Conversations about how to best express those misperceptions, in ways that were neither too confronting nor too bland formed the basis of the resulting program.

Tenders were called by invitation from several indigenous film/video production groups and a group selected. They in turn employed local indigenous actors and people – the "star" of the first video scenario was an employee of the University. The artwork used on the cover of the video and workbook was selected from an Indigenous Australian artist's range.

The coordination of the workbook was initially the responsibility of the Coordinator of Staff Development for the Employment Strategy. With no curriculum or learning material development experience this was seen as a learning opportunity and challenge by the Coordinator. The Manager of the Project undertook to be a learning coach in this phase, and the Coordinator sought out expert help from the Flexible Learning Unit. Thus began another collaboration, and a long, fruitful journey of learning for all involved. Cross-cultural learning entered a new phase for each member of the respective teams, as they grappled with turning conceptions into tangible experiences, and translating learning and technical theory into practice that was acceptable to two diverse cultures.

The content of the workbook was piloted with a number of staff from across the University. They included non-indigenous general and academic staff who were likely to work with, or had worked with Indigenous Australian staff, and also Indigenous Australian staff, to ensure that the content actually reflected indigenous perspectives. Feedback was sought on the materials themselves – the content, the readability, the learning experienced - as well as the design of the program overall. Feedback received at this stage of the project indicated that the materials did, in fact, achieve the stated goals. One respondent went over the materials several times, and stated that she had learnt lot about her self through reflecting on different parts of her life, as directed by the activities.

Designing and developing the content for this program was a rich and rewarding process that involved the transformation of knowledge, wisdom and experience into a tangible reality. Over several months staff from the Flexible Learning Unit worked with the Project Coordinator to translate the concepts of cross-cultural awareness, traditionally expressed through verbal means, into a staff development resource accessible in multiple formats: print, online, video and audio. The evolution of ideas and messages from the spoken, to the written, and ultimately multimedia, reflected a marriage between content expert, educational design staff and technical advisors – a meeting of completely different paradigms of culture and areas of expertise.

Design and development

Rationale
Initial discussions with the Project Coordinator involved an identification of the purpose of the program, who the participants were likely to be and when and where they would be undertaking the program. It also identified the main messages that the Coordinator thought were important to communicate and what she wanted the participants to gain from the program. On the basis of these discussions it was agreed that the content should stimulate a process of thinking, reflection and self-questioning, whereby participants would be presented with ideas, concepts and information that they could then interpret and apply to both personal and professional scenarios in the workplace. In their paper on Instructional Design for Cultural Difference (1999) McLoughlin and Oliver talk about the need to ensure flexibility and to ensure that the content and tasks are designed to take the learners' perspectives into account (p.231). This links directly to the factors identified by the original project team and referred to earlier. One of the key aspects of the total project was to ensure that the underlying learning principles of recognising and accommodating individual differences was reflected in all possible phases.

Please Explain: Indirect Discrimination in the Workplace aims at:

- assisting staff to recognise indirect discrimination in the workplace as an unlawful practice under the Queensland Anti-Discrimination Act (1991);

- increasing individuals' awareness of themselves and how they relate to people of other cultures in the work place;
- providing staff with an opportunity to gain a better understanding of Indigenous Australians' world views and how indirect discrimination may affect work relations;
- increasing the knowledge and sensitivity of non-indigenous staff to the cultural and kinship obligations, workplace protocols and practices of Indigenous Australian staff;
- overcoming discriminatory practices that serve as either perceived or actual barriers; and
- exploring the benefits of having a discrimination free workplace.

In undertaking this program participants are required to draw on their own cultural background and experiences as a means of understanding the diversity of culture within society and to develop an appreciation of the ways in which cultural difference may impact on workplace behaviour. They also gain knowledge that will help them work more effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and enhance their staff supervision skills. In this sense the program aims at improving communications, reducing conflict and nurturing more productive relationships and outcomes that will be of benefit to individuals and the University as a whole.

A staff development program in cross-cultural awareness lends itself well to a reflective learning approach due to the personal nature of the material and the fact that it is based so much on an individual's beliefs and assumptions, conscious and subconscious. Reflective thinking is promoted by activities such as "…relating, experimenting, exploring, reinterpreting from different points of view or within different contextual factors, theorizing and linking theory with practice" (Moon, 1999, p.33) and in this sense is an effective way of approaching the complexity of issues involved in cultural awareness, prejudice and belief systems. It also takes a holistic approach to learning and development - again, suitable to the nature of the content and the outcomes that were intended. As McGill and Beaty (1992) explain, reflective learning (often referred to as 'action' learning):

> … is clearly not about gaining bits and pieces of knowledge, nor about memorizing. It involves the person as a complex whole acting in the world. Action learning therefore supports the view of learning that is about development and understanding in relation to the world rather than separate from it. The learning in action learning is holistic and developmental. It integrates learning from experience with learning with ideas through the process of reflection (p.175).

The concepts explored in the *Please Explain...* program are organised around 5 modules:

> Module 1: Recognising Discrimination
> Module 2: Culture
> Module 3: Diversity
> Module 4: Behaviour
> Module 5: Developing an Action Plan

Please Explain… assumes no prior knowledge of cultural diversity issues. The modules are self contained and can therefore be undertaken in any order depending on the participant's interests and needs. Having said this, particular ideas and concepts are introduced and built on more gradually across the program and some of the activities ask participants to refer back to their answers to previous exercises. This does not inhibit the learning process but serves to enhance opportunities for participants to become more conscious of their own development and changing awareness, throughout the program. The activities included in each module require participants to undertake a range of tasks including reading, reflecting, writing and using the video as a stimulus for further analysis. The activities have been designed to assist participants in dealing constructively with some of the cultural, social and work issues that may arise when working with people from an Indigenous Australian background by encouraging them to reflect on their own experiences in light of the information presented in the module content. Reflective learning:

> … is based on the relationship between reflection and action. We all learning through experience by thinking through past events, seeking ideas that make sense of the event and help us to find new ways of behaving in similar situations in the future. This thinking through or reflection is the essential link between past action and more effective future action. (McGill and Beaty, 1992, p.21)

The modules in *Please Explain...* are structured according to a pattern that identifies the objectives of the module; introduces new concepts; describes the nature and purpose of the activities; poses questions that provide an opportunity for self reflection; suggests additional resources, information and references; and provides options for further investigation. In this sense they support the model for reflective questioning developed by the Institute for Cultural Affairs (cited in Robin, 1997) that includes:

1. Data: Reflect on what happened. What did you do? What caught your attention?
2. Associations and Feelings: What worked? What energized you? What were the low points? What frustrated you?
3. Interpretations: What have been your most significant learnings? What are the implications of them? How does this apply to our key results areas?
4. Decisions: How will you (we) be different? What will you do differently as a result?

An important aspect of this process is the 'actioning' of learnings that result from the reflection process. Some writers, such as Boot and Boxer (1980) argue that "… experience alone is not learning and does not guarantee that learning will take place…. Whether or not (participants) learn will depend on what they 'do' with that experience" (p.1). In support of this emphasis on implementing the outcomes of the reflection process, the *Please Explain…* materials encourage participants to accumulate their ideas and experience throughout each module and incorporate them into an action plan (Module 5) that can be implemented in the workplace.

This style of learning and action is not suitable to all people. In the same way that our cultural identity is linked to our own personal history and upbringing, so too is our approach towards learning. Reflective learning that is recorded via a learning journal (as in the case of *Please Explain...*) exposes ones ideas, attitudes and emotions, which itself is the catalyst for enabling change. As Moon (1999) explains, "…with emotions and attitudes expressed, there is an unusually good possibility of examination and modification. Where they can remain hidden, the opportunity for change is limited" (p.60). So too, the examination of belief systems and cultural assumptions requires that you unravel what Moon (1999) refers to as the "substance that drives the thinking - the experiences, beliefs, sociopolitical values and goals…" (p.65). Programs of this nature can be confronting and must be designed and developed in a way that they provide adequate support and 'safety' for the participants.

Participants in the *Please Explain...* program can choose to interact with the material in the privacy of their own home or office at a time suitable to them. There is no requirement that they must share their experience with others, however there are advantages in doing so. In the introduction to the program materials, participants are 'warned' that they will be looking at a number of work-related cultural issues in a way that may challenge some of their existing understandings, judgements and assumptions. They are advised that Indigenous and other staff within the University are available as informal 'mentors' throughout the program and are provided with information about reconciliation learning circles that operate in a number of community areas.

It is important that participants trust the process and have confidence in the support available to them so that they can genuinely explore their feelings and assumptions about the issues raised. *Please Explain...* gives them a safe and confidential environment in which to do this. While acknowledging that this can be a threatening and uncomfortable experience for some people, it also recognises that:

> …by refusing to confront issues and by side-stepping experiences that challenge we can become stuck and intransigent. Action learning can provide a vehicle for moving forward - to support and challenge the individual so that learning and development happen (McGill and Beaty, 1992, p.188).

For these reasons, participation in the *Please Explain...* program is voluntary.

The challenging and reflective nature of this approach also supports a constructivist, learner-centred understanding of learning and development, whereby the individual finds their own meaning and constructs their own knowledge based on the issues and questions investigated. According to this approach, knowledge is defined as "…a person's meaning constructed by interaction with one's environment…" and instruction is described as "…a learner drawing on tools and resources within a rich environment" (Wilson, 1996, p.4). The *Please Explain...* program provides participants with the

opportunity to clarify their own goals and expectations before they commence, as well as opportunities to monitor these as they move through the process, and provides them with a range of resources to use for their specific purposes. The materials clearly state that the program has been designed to introduce participants to a number of important issues, and does not claim to provide all the answers. It acknowledges that every situation is unique and requires knowledge of the people and circumstances involved, and that the approach of the package is to lead them through activities that will assist them in determining the most appropriate strategies relevant to their specific situation and context. Boot and Boxer (1980) highlight the fact that in this environment, problems may arise for participants who "…are expecting to be 'taught' or 'trained' " (p.3). Participation requires a proactive approach.

*Please Explain …*is based on a belief that the individual can affect change. As McGill and Beaty (1992) argue,

> Action learning is the antithesis of believing that we can do nothing about our situation. Whatever the context, people who use action learning believe that there is always something, however small, that can be done or positively not done (p.34).

The program is designed primarily for managers and supervisors of Indigenous Australian staff, who play an important role in affecting change in the organisation. As McGill and Beaty (1992) suggest, "Development is in the hands of every individual and collections of individuals as groups and organisations" (p.187). The nature of the program as well as the approach taken in its design assumes that the individual is willing to take responsibility for their own actions; for the role they play in preventing discriminatory practice in the workplace as well as in their own meaningful participation in the program. *Please Explain...* encourages managers to learn how to learn by providing them with stimulus material, questions and supporting resources (both human and information).

Reflective learning provides an environment that promotes deeper learning however the learning process is a subjective one and the individual has to be 'ready' for the development to occur progressively and over time. This program uses activities that Boot and Boxer (1980) describe as "…a vehicle to provide the opportunity for participants to explore and make sense of the way they relate to others" (p.3) but they also point out that those involved in the design of the program cannot predict what participants will learn from it because the intention is to "…. to facilitate reflection and the discovery of personal meaning" (p.3).

Requiring participants to record, write down their thoughts and responses for each activity adds another dimension to the reflective process. Moon (1999, p.31) suggests that the act of writing:

- forces time to be taken for reflection (Holy and McLoughlin, 1989);
- forces learners to organize and clarify their thoughts;
- causes learners to focus their attention and forces them into activity;
- captures ideas for later consideration;
- sets up a 'self-provided feedback system' (Yinger, 1985); and
- slows the pace of thinking and thereby increasing its effectiveness (Emig, 1977).

It also helps participants to find their 'voice' - a concept explored by Elbow (1981, cited in Moon, 1999, p.31). Indeed, one of the key ingredients of culture is language and expression, and in this way, the learning theory reflected in the design of the materials supports the factors that the project team identified at the onset as being essential in the development of cross-cultural awareness.

The learning resources
The original aim of the project was to develop a print based workbook for staff to use in conjunction with the video, whereby participants could either use the resources on their own or as part of a facilitated and structured session. At the completion of the design and development of the print materials, an additional phase was scoped and approved for implementation, which resulted in the production of an interactive web site and promotional materials to support the initiative, in all its formats.

Having recently completed the first two stages of a project designed to ensure that all flexible learning resources produced by FLAS are accessible to students with disabilities or other impediments to access (refer to Griffith's Flexible Learning Accessibility Initiative at: http://www.gu.edu.au/gfls/accessibility/), the resources for *Please Explain...* were designed and developed with accessibility in mind. This provided the project team with an ideal opportunity to implement accessibility standards on a site that included multiple media components - print, html, audio and video. The prominent accessibility characteristics of the web based materials include:

- A modular format that enables users to work through the content either in a linear fashion or in their own preferred sequence;
- a textual description of diagrams, graphics, audio and video;
- the collating links from throughout the site into a central list at the beginning of the resources section; and
- providing users with a number of options for accessing and using the materials.

With the content for this staff development resource initially written and structured for print delivery, it needed to be redesigned to some extent to make it suitable for the web. The most notable aspects of this process included:

- making the language less formal
- separating the content into smaller sections
- clarifying and adjusting cross referencing details
- providing more visible and explicit navigation
- making the headings shorter and more succinct
- making explicit all components of the information, with titles and explanations
- rewording the activities

This stage of the project required the team to look at the content from a fresh perspective, in order to explore how best the online environment could support the program's objectives. New opportunities for interactivity became available and ensuring that the resources were accessible to a range of participants was given specific priority. Participants are therefore provided with the option of working through the modules and activities in a number of formats.

Multiple formats

The workbook is available as:

- a printed, bound book - available from Griffith University's Office of HR
- a pdf file that can be downloaded from the website and used in the same way as the printed and bound format (that is, hand writing responses to each activity)
- an rtf (rich text format) file that can be downloaded from the web site and used in much the same way as you would use a Word document, typing your responses into the document itself and saving the workbook to your hard drive or on a floppy disk, to return to later.

Participants choosing to work through the modules and the activities "online" are provided with the opportunity to use an interactive learning journal, whereby their entries are stored on a database which, because of their unique "logon", is password protected to ensure complete confidentiality. Participants can access the online activities, either from their work station or from home. International accessibility standards for the online activities and evaluation form are addressed by the provision of text based alternatives, via the workbook.

The video scenarios can be accessed:

- as a standalone video tape, with or without subtitles, available from Griffith University's Office of HR
- via the website, both in its entirety or as individual scenarios, with or without subtitles
- as an audio file via the web site or audio tape, with narration that describes each scene

- via the web site, as a text file that provides the script of the scenarios and narration for each scene

In addition, participants accessing the video scenarios from the web site are provided with a number of options, such as:

- one clip that includes both scenarios
- separate clips for each scenario
- Apple Quicktime or Windows Media files.

Explanations of each option and their use are provided to assist participants in choosing the best format for their particular needs.

Conclusion and key learnings

This project had three distinct phases: conceptualisation, writing, and technical development. The configuration of personalities and areas of expertise that comprised the project team was different for each of these phases and the nature of the challenges faced in each stage also varied. What remained constant however, throughout all of these phases was the need and desire to maintain the integrity of an 'inclusive' endeavour. That is, that the project would enable individuals to feel that their knowledge and their learning was being accommodated; that there were no 'right' answers or solutions, but many options; and that the learning and development was neither linear nor based on any preconceived notions.

While the project was made up of a rich diversity of team members, each phase of the project was marked by a fundamental commitment to the principles underpinning it and a passion to promote change. Cultural exchange took place between indigenous and non-indigenous staff, between those with technical and non-technical experience, and between the traditions of verbal and written expression.

During this process, the message maintained its relevance. With no time-bound answers or solutions, the methodology used for this project ensured its currency, whereby changes in technology merely served to enable its delivery in a more accessible way.

Griffith is monitoring the use of this program within the University to ensure that it meets the needs of staff. An online evaluation form has been included on the web site, to seek feedback on participants' experience of the Program and its resources. Since its launch at the end of May 2002, 42 staff have accessed the program. The newly appointed Indigenous Employment Coordinator is preparing a more targeted approach to its implementation.

Please Explain: Indirect Discrimination in the Workplace is currently being prepared for commercial release, with six firm orders from tertiary institutions and public sector organisations already placed and other organisations exploring the options.

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