

Training for Bicultural Intervention with Families

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Abstract

As a Maori and a Pakeha we came together as lecturers and practitioners in this project to set up a context for training that could best reflect genuine commitment to an understanding of the term “bicultural”. Our starting point was our recognition of the Treaty being about partnership and the active protection of taonga (treasure). In this context we defined taonga as the health and welfare of individuals and families in the bicultural community and in the classroom.

Over the years many students, Maori and Pakeha, had disclosed that their voices in the classroom were subdued by their fear of saying the “wrong” thing in relation to bicultural politics in social practice. We believed that the most effective way to actualise the bicultural in the training context was, as Maori and Pakeha, to model our own dialogue, which had led to a collaboration we described as “work in progress”. We wanted to avoid a teaching style that replicated oppressive adherence to orthodoxy, and thereby intended to maximise the significance for the learning outcomes of the lived experiences of the students in “dialogical action” (Freire, 1970).

After the eight-week course, the students were surveyed as to their experience of this type of participation in the classroom. Primary in the focus of this research was both the effectiveness of the course and congruency with the process agreed on with the students at the outset. Responses strongly suggested that this style of training was effective and relevant with regard to both process and outcomes. The modelling we used as a key method in this project was cited in the survey results as the significant catalyst to inclusive and productive dialogue.

“Waiho I te toipoto, kau toiroa.” “Let us keep close together, not wide apart.”

Introduction

The authors met on the Bachelor of Social Practice course at UNITEC in Auckland in the mid-1990s. Tiaria (Tuhourangi/Ngati Raukawa) was one of the first Maori graduates of the degree course, and Jill (UK) was a senior lecturer and counsellor. We developed a partnership that created productive dialogue on bicultural issues, and we

wanted to see whether the modelling of this type of partnership would facilitate engagement in the professional training context.

Along with all in social practice, we shared real concerns about statistics for Maori on almost every social indicator. A rash of Maori child abuse fatalities in 1999 compounded our concern and added an urgency to our discussions about policy and practice with whanau. Monocultural social policy is both an imposition and oppressive (Goldson, 2003), but this we saw as only a preliminary position in the training of students. We needed to ask the hard questions about the lack of retention of Maori in both the professional social practice work training arena as well as in the profession itself. In 2000, just under 3.5% of NZAC members identified as Maori.

The challenge, as we saw it, was the search for prescriptive possibilities as opposed to yet more description. For us as trainers, this was a political and ethical issue that related to what and how to teach students in the paper Whanau/Family Systems.

Background

At private times this research process was challenging for us as trainers. This particular style of teaching had been reached via a rigorous path of self-examination and exposure. Our rejection of dichotomies and orthodoxy had at times been met with hostility by "experts" who did not welcome debate on their political positions.

The 30 students, Maori and Pakeha, in this research project were second-year students on the Bachelor of Social Practice in the School of Community Studies at UNITEC, Auckland in 2000. Only four students were under 30 years of age, and the majority were retraining for employment. Nineteen of the students identified as European/New Zealander, eight as Maori and three as Pacific Islanders. The module being taught was Whanau/Family Systems, which examined family intervention issues and was a compulsory paper for all counselling and social work students at second year.

The intent in this small piece of action research was to examine an approach that would be perceived by Maori and Pakeha trainees as an effective teaching context congruent with the bicultural code of ethics for professional practice. We were looking for a way of teaching that would be productive of learning outcomes for professional practice which fully reflected the professional bicultural code of ethics and came from a place of authenticity. We committed to avoidance of conditions in the classroom that create alienation via didactic positions and prioritising of "expert" voices.

Literature background

To find a springboard for a positive training process in the bicultural arena puts emphasis on a political analysis of the classroom dynamic. In his writing on culture

and power in the classroom context, Darder (1991) argues that biculturalism is based on a philosophy of cultural democracy and that this latter concept carries its own unique challenges. Cultural democracy is a requisite in the non-oppressive teaching environment and its successful inception will result in the phenomenon of “double consciousness” and the need for reconciliation. This fragile yet vital balance will fail, Darder continues, without the right social circumstances to sustain it.

Complementary to this view is the position of Mezirow (1990) who, in his writing on culturally relevant adult education, warns of the dangers of dichotomising and thereby limiting knowledge. This, he believes, can lead to a form of indoctrination, the very antithesis of the cultural democracy. Mezirow highlights the importance of discarding the concepts of “correct” and “incorrect” ways of thinking in order to find conciliation.

Mataira (1995) similarly argues that biculturalism cannot be taught. Instead, he suggests, it needs to be lived and experienced. This view is consistent with the educational philosophy of Freire (1970) who argues for the development of a praxis arising from a dialogical relationship. He sees the key to the development of this praxis as being the critical and authentic dialogue that unveils some of the social contradictions in one’s community and beyond. Information and insight resulting from such dialogue must then be constantly tested and renewed via ongoing contact and dialogue with students (Gramsci, 1971).

Foucault (1980) suggests that knowledge practices in modern sciences manipulate human populations. Dominant discourses can create a prescription for being that is then perceived by the individual as a mandated position. This power and subjugation is especially significant in the classroom context. Absence of narrative only reinforces such subjugation. With no dialogue, received knowledge dominates rather than educates. Freire (1970) viewed the traditional educational process as one in which the student is a repository for knowledge deposited by an expert. By drawing on this knowledge for assessment at a later time the student is rewarded.

Traditional educational mechanisms can encourage participants to surrender their own hard-won knowledge, and therefore authenticity, and “submit to the authority of the teacher and shape their life as therapist according to certain specifications” (White, 1990).

We wanted to test the effect that dialogue would have on the ability of students to develop a praxis (Freire, 1970) in bicultural approaches to family therapy. Professional practice is vital in this area, yet it is currently compromised by political complexity and competing discourses.

Our belief was that according priority to political discourses in this area created dichotomies that had the effect of both immobilising the student and stultifying

potential practice in the field. Our intent was to examine the way in which the classroom process could liberate students into the development of true praxis (Darder, 1991; Freire, 1970; Gramsci, 1971; Mezirow, 1990).

Counselling training, like social work training, has re-examined its ideologies and practice as society's attitudes and values have changed. Paternalistic and discriminatory ideologies and models have been challenged and approaches re-evaluated. Extreme adherence to either social work or counselling work with families fails to negotiate the boundaries adequately. Unless the word "counselling" is reserved for some esoteric approach, then it is difficult to know why it would be that social workers and counsellors training to work with families would receive this training in isolation from one another (Brearley, 1995; Triseliotis, 1986). A survey in Auckland City of social workers and counsellors traces the way in which social work and counselling have intertwined and influenced each other in terms of skills, knowledge and values in both the training and the practice context (Goldson, 1997). It is the collective act of individuals engaging in reflection-action that leads to transformation rather than polarities (Freire, 1970).

Methodology

The concept of *whapiki tangata* was introduced. This concept in Maori research methodology embraces the position of Maori by enhancing their right to control aspects of their own futures. We needed Maori and non-Maori in this research, but consciously placed Maori at its centre (Bishop & Glynn, 1992; Durie, 1998) while making it explicit that this was not about delegating unequal workload to Maori in the classroom.

Research needs to faithfully represent the community being studied as well as be rigorous and valid so that it can attract the attention of those who are able to do something about the concerns raised. A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches was chosen to carry the principles of this research, and we utilised questionnaires to evaluate the classroom processes. This was the only part of the module conducted individually, and the questionnaires were anonymous. The questionnaire was administered at the conclusion of the module in accordance with the regulations for UNITEC's SEQUAL evaluation process.

Rating scales measuring students' levels of satisfaction with the course made up the quantitative part of the research, while open questions allowed us deeper insight into the general views of the impact of the bicultural dialogue in the classroom.

Qualitative research by its very nature always carries the possibility of alternative explanations and a measure of uncertainty. Quality assurance processes were based on

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria for ensuring rigour in qualitative research projects, namely: credibility, transferability, auditability and confirmability.

The responses to the open questions were analysed thematically using key concepts from Maori research ethics: whether the process acknowledged the well-being of the individual in the class as well as the group (*mana*); whether it honoured Maori intellectual knowledge (*mauri*), and whether it felt to the student as if *mahitahi* was operating, i.e. shared and cooperative monitoring of the work in progress. Finally it asked whether the student considered the process of learning honoured the contract between Treaty partners in the classroom (*maramatanga*).

Our research was thus framed in a Maori research paradigm and was guided by the principle of *whakatuia*, which is about linking. The application of this principle in our research embraced the notion that cooperation and consensus were significant means of achieving viable, sustainable and effective solutions to the problems of bicultural teaching processes. Cooperation and consensus should be the primary orientation of research activity (Stringer, 1996) and we sought this at all times.

To create action, firstly reflection was needed. We were working collaboratively with our students in a reflexive way. The questionnaires we used looked for information about what the students believed enhanced their learning and their ability to critically reflect on practice and theory.

The process

At the outset we introduced ourselves respectively as Maori and Pakeha, social worker and counsellor, as well as sharing in common our gender as women, teachers, colleagues, partners, daughters and mothers. As teachers and practitioners, we spoke of our own personal sense of challenge about finding a way of incorporating a partnership of dialogue and collaboration into the curriculum and explained that this too was "work in progress" which we looked to share with students. We shared our experiences of two-way dialogue about bicultural policy, how we had found it to be topical and political yet, when it actually came down to it, was often avoided by educators and policy-makers. Dialogue giving way to monologue in the public arena and debate remaining private was an experience shared by students in our discussions.

We made explicit our intent to evaluate the impact of encouraging reflection and dialogue by our students by modelling some of our own dialogue. In particular we sought student reflection on colonisation in training and the potential to reclaim their lives through "dialogical action" (Freire, 1970). In other words, could collaborative dialogue between Treaty partners expedite conditions for finding consensual praxis for professional bicultural intervention with families?

Commencing with a whanau hui on the very notion of biculturalism, the tone was set for the course. Very rapidly, consensus prevailed in the room that in order to create fertile ground for action research on bicultural practice, the right conditions of cultural democracy (Darder, 1991) needed to prevail. These conditions specifically excluded adherence to orthodoxy around “correct” and “incorrect” ways of seeing bicultural practice. A will to listen, to discuss and to debate was contracted by all participants in the class.

Using discussion, led in the first instance by Tiaria, and consciously based on oral tradition, the class developed the parameters for collaborative dialogue around issues of Maori inclusion versus exclusion in curriculum content, in teaching style and in perception of services offered for Maori whanau. At all times we made it very clear that the focus of this research was to find out “what works” and to relate this question to classroom process, content and intervention with whanau. Implicit in this was the prioritising of cultural democracy and the commitment to minimising the paralysis caused by adherence to the opinions of “experts”, which referred back to the contract made by the students.

The principle of whakatuia (making links) was chosen by the students via discussion as a means of guiding the action research. In order to examine the relationships between past and present, people and environment, mind and soul, and politics and policy, the students chose to sit in a circle and to korero their experiences of living and relating as students and as families in a bicultural community. Case studies were freely donated as springboards for dialogue and debate about “what works” and why.

We, as tutors/facilitators, would model dialogue when the class was grappling with difficult and emotional aspects of the subject, particularly at the beginning of the module. At those times we highlighted the dialogue we had evolved together, our ability to disagree without offence, to find points of commonality and difference, and to use humour. Perhaps most important of all, we highlighted the significance of listening to each other and the role it had played and continues to play in our particular bicultural collaboration.

Throughout this process the question we shared with the students was whether specific received theories on family counselling could lead to a bicultural practice they perceived as relevant. Or, alternatively, whether theories they had been taught espoused socio-cultural hegemonic practice. In particular, the discussion on theories generated modifications that catalysed cross-fertilisation and negated the either/or position. We suggested that it was via dialogue and negotiation that such solutions could be found. Using examples from client case studies and our own family life, we demonstrated to students the relevance we felt this type of dialogue had in the application of bicultural

principles for teaching and bicultural principles for social practice in the community.

A key observation for us in the classroom was a palpable release of tension from students as we contracted for safe and free speech and dialogue. As we opened up the discussions, participation and involvement seemed to grow in proportion to the prevailing climate of resistance to “right and wrong” answers. By the second class we noticed that the majority of Maori and Pacific Island students who customarily sat at the back of the classroom had moved either to the front or the middle, and were beginning to contribute at the same rate as their Pakeha peers. By the third and subsequent classes, Maori and Pacific Island students began to contribute as much or more than their peers and this rate remained consistent until the end of the module. The students demonstrated their involvement by their high level of participation and their readiness to use their voice during our hours of collaborative work. These observations were borne out by the evaluations using the questionnaires.

This process of “communicative action”, described by Collins (1991) as “careful and respectful listening resulting in a kind of ongoing, thoughtful dialogue”, was reflected by students in their behaviour in the classroom sessions. The atmosphere in the classroom was relaxed yet involved. Students (without exception) made contributions, and in the breaks were observed continuing their discussions together. It was difficult for us to take a break as students would invariably approach us individually to continue discussion of a point made in class or to give anecdotes from their own experience and expertise as members of the bicultural community.

Results

Using the UNITEC standard SEQUAL format, the 30 students were asked quantitative questions about their satisfaction with communication issues, organisation, teaching style, and extent of lecturers’ encouragement and knowledge of the discipline. The final question asked whether the lecturers excelled in enhancing the learning of the student. The quantitative result of the final question was a mean of 4.9 out of 5, with a standard deviation of .3. The open questions ran as follows:

We are interested to know whether the lecturers’ style enhanced your learning.

Before you scale your response to this question we would ask you to respond to the following open questions:

Tell us a bit about whether or not you felt acknowledged and affirmed in this class as an individual as well as a part of the group. (Mana)

To what extent do you consider that this course has honoured Maori intellectual knowledge? (Mauri)

We introduced this module as work-in-progress and a shared enterprise. Tell us a bit about your impressions of this description of the course now you have completed it. (Mahitahi)

Was the process of learning on this module one which honoured the contract between Treaty partners in the classroom? Why/why not? (Maramatanga)

Responses representative of the 4.9 result referring to the style of teaching included the following:

It was great having both tutors side by side and learning so much more about working with Maori as a result. For me it is paramount that I know how to work effectively with both Maori and Pakeha. (Mahitahi, maramatanga)

Really helped me evaluate what I have been doing in my practice. (Mauri, maramatanga, mauri)

Loved the joint teaching – a first! Should have that sort of partnership in the agency. (Mauri, maramatanga, mana, mahitahi)

Being taught in a proper bicultural way with our Maori and Pakeha side by side – tutors and students alike! (Mauri, maramatanga, mana, mahitahi)

Dissolving the mystery and learning more about how Maori/Pakeha work and learn and LIVE side by side – I learnt heaps, Kia ora! (Mana, maramatanga, mauri, mahitahi)

As a Maori student, thank you both for teaching from the heart – so good to have a voice and to be heard properly. (Mana, mauri, mahitahi, maramatanga)

Something so complex being delivered in the appropriate fashion and we were all part of it – we know so much more together than apart. (Maramatanga, mahitahi, mana)

Thanks both of you for your commitment to Tiriti – a breakthrough and on such a practical level! (Maramatanga, mauri, mauri)

This felt like true bicultural practice – hearing and being heard. (Maramatanga, mana, mahitahi, mauri)

Kaupapa of the classroom really great for learning – feel much more confident about discussions around biculturalism in action. (Mana, maramatanga, mahitahi)

Loved the freedom to debate and argue – we said what we wanted to and we all came out in a good place. (Mana, mauri, maramatanga, mahitahi)

Discussion of results

A key question for us was whether students were able to move away from a position characterised by dichotomies, and towards one that allowed them to articulate their interpretation of bicultural practice via collaborative debate and dialogue. To what extent might this enhance their learning?

Our research instrument reflected a very high level of satisfaction. In this case, where theories of family therapy for application in our bicultural community are being taught, we believed we needed to involve our students in the very heart of what it means to be, to function, in a bicultural country. The explicit resistance to dichotomies created fertile discussions around a cohesive bicultural critique of existing theories. This sense of involvement manifested in a clear commitment to the classroom process of dialogue (and in the breaks as well), a spontaneous rearranging of seating positions, and a marked change in rates of contribution from Maori and Pacific Island students. Interestingly, there was only one absentee at any time over the eight-week module.

Conclusions

It seems that any module which looks to the ethical training of social practitioners has to resonate with the actual experiences of our communities. To presume to “tell” students what it means to practise in a bicultural context, and how they should “do” it, is riven with problems and oppressive politics, taking away as it does the democratic right of the student to examine, explore and collaborate towards a place of authenticity.

Professional practice with families is dependent on the authenticity of the practitioner, and to silence the “lived experience” of students in favour of the voices of “experts” would seem to be the antithesis of promoting this authenticity. We train counsellors not to do this in their work with families, and this needs to be congruent with the way we train in the classroom. Setting up a democratic classroom context, which invites freedom of expression and the right of reply between Treaty partners, seems to be highly conducive to the creation of a jointly owned bicultural praxis.

Perhaps most important of all, modelling a committed partnership between Maori and Pakeha would seem to be an effective method for facilitating authentic engagement of students in the complexities of the bicultural training context. The students requested that their other modules be taught in this way, and their enthusiasm for this method of teaching, and the relevance of its content, served to confirm the purpose of our research.

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