

Promoting Cultural Awareness of University Students in Myanmar

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Abstract

Universities are diverse spaces. Their students are of different races and religions, belong to different socioeconomic groups and are even geographically different: some come from cities, others from rural areas and still more from completely different countries. With such exposure to difference, students have the unique opportunity to learn from others. Myanmar universities, however, are struggling when it comes to this sort of learning. Most like their peers on the continent and globally, commit themselves publicly to core values such as diversity and global citizenship. Yet they are missing out on developing students' intercultural competence, which is key to bringing those core values to life. Someone's cultural awareness is their understanding of the differences between themselves and people from other countries or other backgrounds, especially differences in attitudes and values (Gay. 2000). Intercultural competence is a combination of skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to engage successfully across differences. It's what is required to get along at an interpersonal level with those who may not seem like us. Universities have an important role to play in developing this competence. Doing so can help equip graduates for living and working in the 21st century. Young people should have the opportunity to develop a full understanding of and respect for how ideas and meaning are communicated and creatively expressed in different cultures and through different media forms. These could include printed texts (books, magazines), websites, theatre, film, dance, games, art and design, and music. Time spent at university is another opportunity for young people to

develop their sense of cultural identity. They need the skills to creatively express and interpret ideas, experiences and emotions with empathy. Universities may consider working in partnership with external organisations in order to create a variety of learning experiences. This is particularly important in today's multicultural environment. The purpose of this research is to study cultural awareness of university students in Myanmar. If we and our students have the training, skills, and knowledge to work effectively with a diverse group of people, we will also be able to open more doors for our business.

Keywords: Cultural Awareness, Students, University, Myanmar

Introduction

Cultural awareness is sensitivity to the similarities and differences that exist between two different cultures and the use of this sensitivity in effective communication with members of another cultural group. With the globalization of the world economy and the popularization of international exchange, the world is becoming a “global village”, where people with different colors of skin, using different languages and from different countries as well as different cultural backgrounds are living together just like the “global villagers”. Myanmar is in

desperate need of people who are familiar with foreign cultures and capable of communicating accurately and appropriately in cross-cultural situations. This is a new challenge for all the levels of teaching and learning. Especially, tertiary education needs to help students build solid foundation for language proficiencies and cross-cultural communicative competency.

1.1 How universities can teach their students to respect different cultures (Dorn & Cavalieri-Koch. 2005)

Focusing on intercultural competence can also encourage the kind of often hard discussions that will benefit Myanmar in the long run. Apartheid physically kept people apart and this legacy persists, meaning that really getting to know different people is unlikely to happen organically for most Myanmar. Educational institutions, at all levels, become key sites of intentional interactions and potential interventions that facilitate deeper connections with each other. A primary goal of culturally responsive education is to help all students become respectful of the multitudes of cultures and people that they will interact with once they exit the educational setting. This can be a daunting task for the educator, given that the world at large is infinitely more complex and diverse than the microcosmic environment that the student inhabits.

In typical educational and social settings there is a marked tendency for students to exhibit classic in-group / out-group behaviors. Universities can teach their students to respect different cultures by using a culturally-centered instructional approach that can help facilitate cultural pride among diverse students as follows:

1.1.1 Teaching intercultural competence through formal lessons

Teaching intercultural competence can happen both formally – in the classroom and through the curriculum – and informally, through students’ activities and their daily lives in university residences and around campus. There are a wide range of classroom activities that can help students recognize the essential humanity and value of different types of people. For instance, providing students with an opportunity to share stories of their home life, such as family holiday practices, provides fellow students with a window into their peer’s cultural traditions. In the formal curriculum, universities should be examining what is taught, how it is taught and who is being taught in regard to intercultural learning, both domestically and internationally. Teachers must also understand that students arrive from different places and at different stages in their cultural development. Lecturers need to appropriately engage all students in the classroom to ensure that, at the end

of their degrees, students can communicate intelligently and appropriately across cultures in order to begin moving beyond their own stereotypes and prejudiced views. While these formal interventions are important, there is also a lot that can be done beyond the classroom to develop students’ intercultural competence.

1.1.2 Teaching intercultural competence through informal learning

Universities can boost intercultural competence elsewhere on campus, as much learning occurs outside the classroom. Teaching intercultural competence has gained prominence in recent years due to the fact that the need for communication skills in the context of international encounters has become more widely acknowledged. The curricula of universities, as well as the curricula of cultural studies programmes, have integrated courses on intercultural communication as part of the academic offer that promises to train students for their future workplace. However, more than a work-related skill, intercultural communication can be envisioned as a life skill which allows one to function effectively in his or her day-to-day activities. Some ICT resources can be used in intercultural training, and it gives examples of good practice. In order to develop the knowledge, skills and the right attitude towards other cultures, trainers of

intercultural communication ought to create opportunities for learners to become self-motivated in their discovery of other cultures, to interact with foreigners and to acquire the public virtues and values of a global, transcultural citizen. Such a citizen can navigate “the waves of culture” (to use Trompenaars’ metaphor) via Web 2.0 tools, so as to become more open, flexible, autonomous, transparent and sensitive in his or her communication. In order to develop the knowledge, skills and the right attitude towards other cultures, trainers of intercultural communication ought to create opportunities for learners to become self-motivated in their discovery of other cultures, to interact with foreigners and to acquire the public virtues and values of a global, transcultural citizen. Such a citizen can navigate “the waves of culture” (to use Trompenaars’ metaphor) via Web 2.0 tools, so as to become more open, flexible, autonomous, transparent and sensitive in his or her communication

1.2 Ways teachers can foster cultural awareness in the classroom

(Valdes. 1986)

Another important goal of culturally responsive education is to teach students to respect and appreciate their own culture and heritage. Minority students can sometimes feel pressured to dispose of their cultural

norms, behaviors, and traditions in order to fit in with the prevalent social order. Providing opportunities for students to investigate unique facets of their community is one effective way to help students gain a greater appreciation for their own culture. A multicultural society is best served by a culturally responsive curriculum. Universities that acknowledge the diversity of their student population understand the importance of promoting cultural awareness. We who are interested in fostering a cultural awareness in their classroom should actively demonstrate to their students that they genuinely care about their cultural, emotional, and intellectual needs. To this end, there are several strategies that teachers can use to build trusting relationships with diverse students. To incorporate cultural awareness into the classroom curriculum, teachers should: express interest in the ethnic background of the students, encourage the students to research and share information about their ethnic background as a means of fostering a trusting relationship with fellow classmates and analyze and celebrate differences in traditions, beliefs, and social behaviors.

1.2.1 To express interest in the ethnic background of the students

Teachers encourage the students to research and share information about their ethnic background as a means of fostering a

trusting relationship with fellow classmates. They also analyze and celebrate differences in traditions, beliefs, and social behaviors. It is of note that this task helps students realize that their beliefs and traditions constitute a culture as well, which is a necessary breakthrough in the development of a truly culturally responsive classroom. Also, they may take the time to learn the proper pronunciation of student names and express interest in the etymology of interesting and diverse names.

1.2.2 To redirect teacher's role in the classroom from instructor to facilitator

Another important requirement for creating a nurturing environment for students is reducing the teacher differential between the instructor and students. Students in a classroom may sometimes display negative behaviors as a result of a perceived sense of social injustice; in the culturally diverse classroom, the teacher thus acts more like a facilitator than an instructor. Providing students with questionnaires about what they find to be interesting or important provides them with a measure of power over what they get to learn and provides them with greater intrinsic motivation and connectedness to the material. Allowing students to bring in their own reading material and present it to the class provides them with an opportunity to both interact with

and share stories, thoughts, and ideas that are important to their cultural and social perspective.

1.2.3 To maintain high expectations for student performance

Given that culturally responsive instruction is a student-centered philosophy, it should come as no surprise that expectations for achievement are determined and assigned individually for each student. Students do not receive lavish praise for simple tasks but do receive praise in proportion to their accomplishments. If a student is not completing her work, then one should engage the student positively and help guide the student toward explaining how to complete the initial steps that need to be done to complete a given assignment or task.

1.2.4 Why culturally literate employees create better work (Flavell, Thackrah & Hoffman. 2013)

Cultural literacy is important both to individuals and to the society. As an individual, cultural literacy will help us to successfully interact with people from diverse backgrounds. It helps students to develop a critical cultural perspective, especially if they are part of the 'dominant culture': instead of taking own cultural beliefs and practices for granted and seeing them as 'normal'. Cultural literacy also helps us develop associated skills, such as

communication and self-reflection (Flavell, Thackrah & Hoffman. 2013). Cultural literacy contributes positively to the society in which we live. It reduces prejudice and inequality based on culture, increases the value placed on diversity, and increases participation in the social practices of that society, including access to institutions and services (Anning, 2010). When culturally literate people have influence in institutions like universities or government agencies, they can ensure that people from all cultural backgrounds are able to participate equitably in education and services. Also at a workplace, developing culturally literate can enhance communication, productivity, and unity in the workplace. And when these employees deal with foreign customers and colleagues, there will be little to no misunderstandings and no mistakes, allowing them to create better work because they can understand others who are different from them.

Methodology

One of the most important activities of the research was education-related data collection and handling. In this process, we had to communicate with the universities directly. In total, 201 respondents participated including: 145 students and 56 teachers. Research aims to explore the diverse cultural factors on formation of students' intercultural

competences based on teaching university students to respect different cultures, ways teachers can foster cultural awareness in the classroom and why culturally literate employees create better work. Study revealed the following tendencies: students have insufficient knowledge about different cultures, in fact, they do not have enough experience of communicating with other cultural representatives, and they are reluctant to integrate with different cultures. These gaps are directly correlated with university culture dimensions, such as: university community diversity, teaching content, and the style of pedagogical relations. Among the trends, we can differentiate the following: students' readiness to consider different views in university-related decision-making process; students' belief that they can improve the university culture. The university, as the leading agent of intercultural education, should undertake the responsibility for developing intercultural competencies in students in order to eliminate the identified gaps and strengthen the positive trends, which can be achieved by active, consistent, and purposeful use of intercultural education methods and extracurricular educational strategies. The majority of respondents (81%) were Myanmar respondents, followed by Kachin (8%) Shan (8%), Kayah (1.5%) Chinese (1%), Indian (2%) in

terms of their number. We used qualitative and quantitative research methods while studying students’ intercultural competences. In particular, while analyzing the data of intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes of university community agents — students and teachers — we applied quantitative methods, while studying the interactions — we used qualitative methods.

How universities can teach their students to respect different cultures

It is important to respect other cultures and religions because people of that culture, people of that religion deserve the basic respect they would want for themselves. We respect a certain culture or religion because we respect the people who practice it. It’s about the people (Dorn & Cavalieri-Koch. 2005).

Table 1 Responses of the students towards the knowledge to respect different cultures (n=145)

Sr No	Teaching	Responses			
		Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	
1	Formal lessons	Teaching intercultural competence can happen both formally in the classroom and informally, through students’ activities and their daily lives in university residences and around campus.	44	35	66
		At university, there are a wide range of classroom activities that can help students recognize the essential humanity and value of different types of people.	3	28	114
2	Informal learning	Our universities boosts intercultural competence elsewhere on campus, as much learning occurs outside the classroom.	11	26	108
		We have some ICT resources that can be used in intercultural training, and it gives examples of good practice.	28	22	95

The data show that attitudes of students toward different cultures are slightly positive. University role in intercultural education is ineffective — the university administration is not involved in the implementation of intercultural education; curricular and extracurricular activities for development of students’ intercultural awareness and sensitivity are rarely offered. Some students do not have enough intercultural knowledge and the experience of teaching cultures. This gap led to our interest to study students’ intercultural competence formation on tertiary level education at universities. Students have insufficient knowledge about different cultures, in fact, they do not have enough experience of communicating with other cultural representatives, and they are reluctant to integrate with different cultures. When working and learning with people from a variety of backgrounds and cultures present in the classroom, students gain a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. It also teaches students how to use their own strengths and points of view to contribute in a diverse working environment.

Ways teachers can foster cultural awareness in the classroom

In the process of research, we considered a combination of intercultural knowledge, intercultural skills and intercultural attitudes as the basis for students’ intercultural competence, which has a solid foundation: in particular, the goals of general education of Myanmar provides for continuous development of these three components and correspondingly, subject competences are focused on the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in university curriculum (Valdes. 1986).

Table 2 Teachers’ responses on ways they can foster cultural awareness in the classroom (n=56)

Sr No	Ways	Responses		
		Always	Sometimes	Never
1	To express interest in the ethnic background of students.	10	18	28
	We encourage students to research and share information about their ethnic background as a means of fostering a trusting relationship with fellow classmates.			
	We analyze and celebrate differences in traditions, beliefs, and social behaviors.	4	12	40

Table 2 (Continued)

Sr No		Ways	Responses		
			Always	Sometimes	Never
2	To redirect teacher's role in the classroom from instructor to facilitator	We reduce the teacher differential between the instructor and students.	20	14	22
		We allow students to bring in their own reading material and present it to the class provides them with an opportunity to both interact with and share stories, thoughts, and ideas that are important to their cultural and social perspective.	3	11	42
3	To maintain high expectations for student performance	Expectations for achievement are determined and assigned individually for each student.	15	16	25
		If a student is not completing her work, then we engage the student positively and help guide the student toward explaining how to complete the initial steps that need to be done to complete a given assignment or task.	10	9	37

All good teachers build a bridge between what students know and what they need to learn. Yet teaching that embraces students' cultural background has largely been left out of current debates on what makes teachers effective. Culturally responsive teaching often requires confronting some of the most painful divides in student life. According to the data above-mentioned, weaknesses have been found in redirecting teachers' role in the classroom from instructor to facilitator (item 2) and teacher's interest in the ethnic background of students (item 1). Promoting awareness and creating a personal connection with diverse cultures in the classroom can prevent students from developing prejudices later in life. It allows them to empathize with people different from themselves since they're more aware of the experiences someone of a different race or cultural group may face.

Why culturally literate employees create better work

Cultural literacy is important both to individuals and to the society they live in. As an individual, cultural literacy will help students to successfully interact with people from diverse backgrounds. It helps them to develop a critical cultural perspective, especially if they are part of the ‘dominant culture’: instead of taking their own cultural beliefs and practices for granted and seeing them as ‘normal’. Cultural literacy also helps students develop associated skills, such as communication and self-reflection (Flavell, Thackrah & Hoffman. 2013).

Table 3 Teachers’ responses on why culturally literate employees create better work (n=56)

Sr No	To create better work	Responses		
		Agree	Undecided	Disagree
1	Cultural literacy helps students develop associated skills, such as communication and self-reflection	50	3	3
2	When culturally literate people have influence in institutions like universities or government agencies, they can ensure that people from all cultural backgrounds are able to participate equitably in education and services.	44	7	5
3	Developing culturally literate and aware employees can enhance communication, productivity, and unity in the workplace.	51	3	2

The benefits of workplace cultural awareness extend Beyond “Getting Along”. Being aware of the common differences between cultures increases trust, improves work relationships and streamlines projects. It also improves communication, which is the backbone to any successful team. Most participants agree that developing culturally literate and aware employees can enhance communication, productivity, and unity in the workplace. Naturally, by exposing students to a diverse range of opinions, thoughts, and cultural backgrounds, teachers are encouraging them to be more open-minded later in life. This will make them open to new ideas and be able to attain a greater comprehension on a topic by taking in different points of view.

Results

Universities in Myanmar are highly diverse. They include students of different color, cultural backgrounds, and languages. Students in diverse Universities can expand their understanding and knowledge of different cultural backgrounds. Yet, to guarantee students' fair access to education, teaching instructions should be culturally responsive to all students and engender a network of relationships based on trust, mutual respect, and valuing of diversity (Ur. 1996). In regard to how universities can teach their students to respect different cultures, students slightly get intercultural competence from both forms of learning. The institutional support here is in need of the development of students' intercultural awareness. In and outside of the classroom, students need to be equipped with intercultural competence so that they can well deal with different types of people, regardless of race, religion or belief. Then they themselves become aware of such things as the essential humanity, value of different type of people and the sense of being important. Moreover, the use of ICT in intercultural training is weak. In fact, ICT resources can support training that arouses students' awareness of intercultural competence. Culturally responsive teaching plays an important role in approaching and achieving students' cultural awareness. It is

noted that a combination of three categories: intercultural knowledge, intercultural skills and intercultural attitudes are regarded as the basis for intercultural competence and thus they should be introduced through some cultured-oriented lessons in university curriculum. Teachers in the classroom take an interest in cultivating competence for students. Yet, weaknesses have been found in redirecting teachers' role in the classroom from instructor to facilitator and teacher's interest in the ethnic background of students. Teachers' responses on why culturally literate employees create better work are very positive. They are very sure that students can develop such associated skills as communication and self-reflection through the development of cultural literacy. Cultural literacy is important both to each student and to the society they live in as it helps him or her develop a critical cultural perspective. Nowadays, the workplace is changing rapidly. People from many countries are represented in the workforce all over the world. Not only that, businesses often deals with clients and partners from different parts of the globe. A person's culture can affect how she behaves in the workplace, from the way she speaks to the way she interacts with colleagues. It's important to be aware of cultural differences so they can avoid conflicts that are related

to diversity. By ensuring that employees know the importance of understanding cultural differences in the workplace, they can maximize their business's potential by uniting everyone to focus on achieving goals.

Discussion

This study aimed at exploring cultural awareness of university students in Myanmar using three categories: students' attitudes towards the knowledge to respect different cultures, teachers' ways of fostering cultural awareness in the classroom and the responses on why culturally literate employees create better work. University teachers strongly believe that only culturally literate people can create a better workplace, engage in different cultural backgrounds and improve relationships in the workplace. Most students reported that they need to be supplied with more cultured-related lessons that lead them to competence in cross cultural situations. They are still to be trained through different activities. Thus, it is important to remind the teachers why diversity and cultural awareness is so crucial in the classroom and the benefits it can have on students now and in the long-term. Teaching diversity exposes students to various cultural and social groups, preparing students to become better citizens in their communities (Rivers. 1997). These

culturally responsive teaching strategies will help them to promote diversity in the classroom. With these culturally responsive teaching strategies in mind, it's important to remind ourselves why diversity and cultural awareness is so crucial in the classroom and the benefits it can have on students now and in the long-term. Being culturally aware is synonymous with being more knowledgeable about different parts of the world. One should show that he/she values their diversity by acknowledging and celebrating it. Understanding own culture, and how it shapes behavior, is also an important part of being culturally aware. This deeper understanding of own culture can provide insight when learning about other cultures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, cultural awareness helps students create a better work environment. Only culturally literate people are able to participate equitably in education and services. Consequently, they feel more satisfied with themselves and enjoy handling the potential mistakes in comprehension, interpretation and communication skills. In doing so, they are in harmony with everyone in local or international contexts. With the rise of globalization, it's more important to be able to work with people from different cultures and social groups. If students are

exposed to diversity and learn cultural awareness in the classroom, it sets them up to flourish in the workforce (Brown. 2001). Myanmar is practicing an open-door system and more and more investors take an interest in running business in Myanmar. Culturally literate students find it easy to get along with working conditions as well as their fellow workers who might be Myanmar or foreigners. Cultivating, this practice and the cultural competence given by university lead them to a better workplace with better relationships and understanding. Students who learn about different cultures during their education feel more comfortable and safe with these differences later in life. This allows them to interact in a wider range of social groups and feel more confident in themselves as well as in their interactions with others. Thus, one of the key ingredients in promoting cultural awareness is to make tolerance and inclusion a priority.

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