

# **International Online Collaboration: Giving Voice to the Study of Diversity<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This paper will describe how preservice teachers, inservice teachers and teacher educators inquired into the complex topics surrounding teaching about cultural diversity and teaching in cultural diverse classrooms. An international online collaborative project was used as the vehicle to share literature, multiple perspectives and pedagogical approaches related to diversity in today's classrooms. Outcomes of the project show that the pre-service teachers gained a rich understanding of the issues and a range of pedagogical practices which can be used in their classrooms. This online project can be easily adapted and used with students in schools to give them the lived experience of being online collaborators who can develop global relationships for the purpose of increasing their understanding of cultural diversity.

## **Introduction**

As teacher educators, at the University of Calgary and University of Southern Queensland, one of our goals has been to build the capacity of preservice teachers to work with culturally diverse learners and their families and to be responsive to the needs of all learners within culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the process and to share the experiences and insights of the participants in a dynamic online international collaborative project that has been developed and implemented seven times since 2006 within the two teacher preparation programs. Within the cross-institutional project, preservice teachers and teacher educators were joined by inservice teachers as experts, to create an online

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learning experience which has provided an opportunity for preservice teachers to develop global relationships, increase understanding of diversity and inclusivity, and support the ongoing development of culturally responsive practice. Using an inquiry-based approach within a technologically-enhanced learning environment, the aim of the project was to advance educational thought and practice and provide preservice teachers with an opportunity to live the experience of being online collaborators and investigate real-world teaching issues such as diversity and inclusivity. For this paper, the elements of the project directly related to diversity, specifically cultural diversity will be examined.

The project was oriented to preservice teachers within two teacher preparation programs. However, this online project can be adapted and used with students in schools to give them the lived experience of being online collaborators who can develop global relationships for the purpose of increasing their understanding of cultural diversity.

### **Setting the Context**

As teacher educators, at the University of Calgary, Canada and University of Southern Queensland, Australia one of the goals has been to build the capacity of preservice teachers to teach about cultural diversity, to work with culturally diverse learners and their families and to be responsive to the needs of all learners within culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Given the competing demands to best prepare preservice teachers for tomorrow's classrooms, innovative approaches need to be in place to provide them with the opportunity to identify and inquire into issues related to diversity and how to honour diversity in today's classrooms.

In Canada, it has been predicted that by "2031, between 25% and 28% of the population could be foreign-born... between 29% and 32% of the population could belong to a visible minority group" (Statistics Canada, 2010). "By 2031, nearly one-half (46%) of Canadians aged 15 and over would be foreign-born, or would have at least one foreign-born parent, up from 39% in 2006 "(Statistics Canada, 2010). Adding to the shift in demographics is the "fact that most culturally diverse students and their teachers *live* in different worlds, and they do not fully understand or appreciate one another's experiential realities" (Gay, 2011, p. 144). This not only impacts what occurs in school, but also how

we prepare teachers in teacher education programs in terms of understanding cultural diversity but also being responsive to it, and being pedagogically responsive in how students and teachers take up cultural and global topics and issues.

It has been argued by Banks, Cochran-Smith, Moll, Richert, Zeichner, LePage, Darling-Hammond, Duffy, and McDonald (2005) that “all teachers need to develop cultural competence in order to effectively teach students with backgrounds different from their own” (p. 237). Further, that “[t]eachers’ attitudes and expectations, as well as their knowledge of how to incorporate the cultures, experiences, and needs of their students into their teaching, significantly influence what students learn and the quality of their learning opportunities” (p. 243). This cultural competency requires teachers to have the knowledge and skills and attitude to create learning relationships and environments so that every child thrives, learns and is respected irrespective of cultural or linguistic background.

Preservice teachers need to grasp an understanding of the concept of culture and its impact on all participants in the learning journey, including the children with different cultural backgrounds, and their families, and the children for whom the dominant culture is the mainstream culture. Kidd, Sánchez and Thorp (2008) argued that “developing culturally responsive dispositions and teaching practices is a developmental process that differs among preservice teachers” (p. 328). They further noted that it is not an easy task to plan programs that “support the transformation that must occur” (p. 328). “Given the daunting range of multidimensional skills required to teach in today’s diverse classrooms, teachers--both preservice and in-service--need training, support, and mentoring to effectively implement diversity responsive practice” (Sobel & Taylor, 2005, p. 86).

As teacher educators, we are given the challenge to design learning opportunities and provide experiences to build “culturally responsive practice” (Banks et al., 2005) among preservice teachers. In the review of the literature, we were able to identify various strategies that can be used to inform the design of these learning experiences. To support preservice teacher transformation and to foster culturally responsive practice and dispositions, a more systematic approach is required, so as to give the preservice teachers a range of appropriate experiences that will inform their dispositions and teaching practice. “Determining the types of experiences that influence dispositions and teaching

practices will increase the likelihood that teacher educators will design program experiences that promote teaching practices that enhance the development of diverse young children” (Kidd, Sánchez & Thorp, 2008, p. 328). The design of the international project was informed by the research of Sobel and Taylor (2005) who found that preservice teachers requested “more exposure, more explicit modeling and demonstration, more cultural information and more candid conversations” (p. 86). From Kidd et al.’s study, preservice teachers reported the following five types of experiences had contributed to the change in disposition and teaching practice: “(a) readings focused on issues of race, culture, poverty, and social justice; (b) internships in diverse communities; (c) interactions with diverse families; (d) critical reflection; and (e) dialogue and discussion” (p. 326).

An important issue as identified by Gay (2011) is that “examining beliefs and attitudes about cultural diversity, along with developing cognitive knowledge and pedagogical skills, are included as essential elements of teacher education” (p, 151). Throughout a teacher education program, teacher educators can use various experiences to intentionally orchestrate learning opportunities to challenge preservice teachers’ own beliefs, assumptions and attitudes in relation to cultural diversity. Teacher educators can provide access to literature which provides a range of perspective and also facilitate guided questions and scaffold discussion to help preservice teachers to critically think about the learners, the cultural diversity, as well as how can they, as teachers, create learning environments that are respectful of and honour diversity.

As teacher educators, we cannot shy away from unpleasant and uncertain conversations because the failure and unwillingness to look, listen, and learn about diversity, oppression, and the experiences of the cultural other significantly interfere with the ability to critique and problematize school or ‘teach against the grain’ (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. xii).

### **Online International Collaborative Project**

Within the assigned undergraduate curriculum courses, the instructors wanted to provide an authentic learning experience where preservice teachers were given the

opportunity to critically think about cultural diversity, challenge their own beliefs and assumptions, and engage in conversation with experts to help inform their teaching practice in relation to being more culturally responsive. Preservice teachers involved in this project came from Asia, Australia, North America, and the United Kingdom. Having participants from various locations in the world provided a diverse range of backgrounds, experiences and perspectives.

The interdisciplinary project hoped to advance educational thought and practice in the development of global relationships and increase the understanding of cultural diversity among preservice teachers within two teacher education programs (University of Calgary and the University of Southern Queensland). The goals of the inquiry-based project were to:

- Provide open and flexible environments for authentic discussion between preservice teachers, inservice teachers and teacher educators.
- Create opportunities for the development of deep understanding of diverse classrooms through discourse and sharing of experiences and resources.
- Develop global relationships through having the experience of working in a global classroom and to gain a global perspective and understanding of issues/topics.
- Develop an increased understanding of diversity and inclusivity in today's classrooms.

The project embedded in the curriculum courses occurred over a six-week period that accommodated both Canadian and Australian course schedules. A challenge was to provide opportunity for rich, authentic discussions for all participants, yet be respectful of differences between individual and program schedules (e.g., practicum experiences and semester breaks).

A four stage project was designed to move preservice teachers from reading and discussing a novel in relation to the topic of diversity within small groups, to that of interacting and engaging in dialogue with peers and experts. This was followed by exploring pedagogical practice and classroom applications. The following four stages of the project are explained in detail below:

- 1) Community building

- 2) Learning from a shared experience
- 3) Learning from teachers as experts
- 4) Critical reflection (Redmond & Lock, 2009).

### **Stage one: Community building**

The creation of a learning community was a priority in order to provide the participants with a “safe climate, an atmosphere of trust and respect, an invitation for intellectual exchange, and a gathering place for like-minded individuals who are sharing a journey” (Conrad, 2005, p. 2). In this stage, preservice teachers were given the opportunity to become familiar with posting and interacting in the online discussion forum in Blackboard™. They were given the task of introducing themselves and meeting colleagues online. Through this task, they were establishing a social presence through introductions, sharing of personal images or stories, and responding to colleagues from different locations. Through their initial interactions with their new colleagues, they were establishing a familiarity with and acceptance of others (Redmond, & Lock, 2009).

### **Stage two: Learning from a shared experience**

The process began by providing a common experience to launch initial discussions both in the face-to-face classes and online discussions through a book rap activity. All preservice teachers were required to read one of four selected stimulus novels that mapped to theme of diversity and/or inclusivity. Examples of the novels used were *Parvana's Journey* (Ellis, 2005) and *A Group of One* (Gilmore, 2005). In novel teams, they were to review the novel, make linkages to both pedagogical implications and to respective curriculum documents, and develop inquiry questions which would be used to spark initial discussions related to the novel and to the project themes. The use of stimulus novels laid the foundation for a shared experience designed to trigger online dialogue and provide an anchor in which preservice teachers could link back to when new ideas or concepts were introduced or challenged.

From each of the novel reviews, the preservice teachers' inquiry questions were reviewed by the instructor and one or two key questions were selected (and modified if necessary) and posted in discussion forums to spark the next phase of online discourse. The following are examples of questions:

- Parvana's journey to find her family was full of hardship and adversity and resiliency. Describe a time in your life when you've had to be resilient. Compare the qualities Parvana possessed with those you did.
- How should a teacher examine social issues, accommodate and be sensitive to differences (e.g. different cultures, different perspectives), and promote a trusting environment? Provide examples and strategies that you have observed, experienced, and found in literature.
- What is it that defines what is an Australian or Canadian? In what way does family impact on the development of a person's identity?

The structured initial online discussion provided opportunity for preservice teachers to share their experiences, make connections to the novel and to other readings, and to continue questioning as part their inquiry journey. The instructors moderated the online discussion forums, modeling effective practice in terms of online discussion, as well as encouraging preservice teachers to move from statements such as 'I agree', or 'I feel/think', to "a higher cognitive level of engagement where they purposefully questioned each other, shared examples and resources, supported comments with statements from literature, made connections to concepts from other posts, literature, experience etc" (Redmond & Lock, 2009, p. 270).

### **Stage three: Learning from teachers as experts**

In the fourth and fifth week, preservice teachers and teacher educators were joined by invited inservice teachers who worked in the role of experts. Forums were established in areas such as cultural diversity, second language learners, internationalization, and teaching in an inclusive classroom. Each forum had teacher experts from both Canada and Australia. These discussion forums were designed to provide an opportunity for preservice teachers to ask the experts for strategies, insights

and resources. “From the information provided by experts, the pre-service teachers were willing to share their experiences in depth, and continued to question to gain deeper knowledge of the key concepts and issues. Interestingly, the pre-service teachers also kept linking the discussion with the concepts from the stimulus books” (Redmond & Lock, 2009, p. 270).

To augment the asynchronous online discussion, synchronous opportunities were provided either through a videoconference or more recently with Café Conversations using Wimba. One activity used during the synchronous session was a scenario which required preservice teachers and experts to engage in discussion and provide strategies of how they would address the situation. Out of this experience, preservice teachers identified areas that they personally needed to learn more about and were encouraged to develop professional growth plans identifying elements of pedagogical practice and classroom application.

#### **Stage four: Critical reflection**

During the final week of the project, preservice teachers were responsible for writing a reflection of their personal experience working as online collaborators who inquired into issues and practices that impact teaching and learning. They reflected on their experience in the project in terms of both the process and the content. Preservice teachers shared their reflection with colleagues by posting them in a discussion forum in Blackboard™. By posting their reflections, they shared what they had learned and where their learning needed to go next.

#### **Learning from the Voices in the Community**

With each implementation of the project, a qualitative research study was conducted using case study methodology for the purpose of examining the complexity of the online collaborative experiences. Data were collected from the online discussions, reflective artifacts and focus group interviews of both preservice teachers and experts. Data were analyzed using a content analysis model for computer-mediated



communication, as well as constant comparative analysis is used to identify themes from the focus group interviews and artifact data sources.

### **Voice of the Learners**

Given the purpose and scope of this article, we have selected to share data from one iteration of the project with a specific focus on the topic of cultural diversity. We have used the information from the expert discussion forum, the preservice teacher reflections, and the expert interviews and student focus group interviews for the purpose of illustrating the nature of the discussions and the highlighting the dynamics of the online learning experience.

From our analysis of the data from the expert discussion forum entitled “Cultural Diversity, Internationalization and Second Language”, we identified four ways information was taken up by the participants. First, preservice teachers shared observations from school experiences and their own experiences which led to questions and further discussion with experts and colleagues. Second, they were linking theory to practice by sourcing relevant literature and making connections to their practicum experience. Third, they were referencing comments and information shared by experts and colleagues and were linking the threads of the discussion from what others had said. Fourth, they were asking questions to inform their own practice. This was critical given that they felt that they were in a safe place to ask questions and show what they did not know, but also opened themselves through questions to gain information to inform their thinking and practice. Further, what became evident was that the questions preservice teachers initially asked of the experts, soon grew into a conversation where interaction occurred among the preservice teachers, as well as among the experts and preservice teachers.

The following example provides insight into the type of topics explored and discussed in the expert forum. A preservice teacher was inquiring into how to take up religious diversity in a public school. This person wanted some guidance on how to be respectful and honouring various religions, as well as how to present accurate information. Another preservice teacher who responded noted, “Touchy subject and

never want to cross lines but I have always believed that students should know about other religions to understand those around them, countries they are studying or the reason for celebrating holidays.” A second respondent asked, “What can you really say about religion? Would it be something that would get you in a lot of trouble with parents or administrators?”

The following is excerpt from one student’s reflection with regard to what was most significant in his/her learning. This reflection provides insight into the thinking that had occurred.

“The most significant point raised for me was the idea of identity, especially in a country such as Australia which prides itself on multiculturalism. The idea was raised for me while reading the book *A Group of One* and completing the group activity. In a country where most people have emigrated from other countries, what identity do they give themselves? What identity do others give them? Most importantly, how, as a teacher, and a person living in a multicultural society, do I value and respect each individual without my good intentions offending. I don’t want to be like Tara’s teacher “Tolly” whose well meaning comments hurt and angered students.”

At the end of the study, two student focus group interviews were hosted to gain preservice teachers’ perspective of their learning and their experience. The following information was gleaned from the data related to questions on teaching of diversity and teaching in diverse classrooms. It was evident from their responses, first that students had gained new ideas of *how* to teach in relation to multiculturalism. Second, they had developed greater awareness of diversity in the classroom. Third, they became educated to look beyond their own country and to see what is available in relation to education and where to access information. For example, an Australian preservice teacher spoke of beginning to look at American, Canadian and British examples and information. Fourth, they learned the need to design learning around cultural acceptance. They developed an appreciation that it is more than awareness of cultures, but that of understanding of cultures and acceptance of cultures. They wanted to be able to design learning so students could be educated in ways that would foster greater cultural acceptance.

Within the preservice teacher focus group interview and in some of the reflections, the preservice teachers identified gaps in their knowledge and skills with regard to cultural competency and went on to explain what additional training or

experiences they considered to be important for their professional learning. First, they articulated the need for more real world, life experiences to help them with their learning journey. This would come with their next practicum and with their future teaching experiences. Second, they acknowledged they have more to learn. They recognized the notion that learning is continuous, and they appreciated the need for learning more. Third, they spoke to the fact that the project “set the scene” but it was now their responsibility to take the work further. It was evident that they were accepting responsibility for their continued professional learning.

Based on the reflections and focus group interviews, preservice teachers were satisfied with their learning as a result of their participation in the project. The following are a few examples of statements made in terms of satisfaction with the project:

- “I especially enjoyed the expert forum about Cultural Diversity and hope to implement some of the ideas that I read about in my future classrooms.”
- “I really appreciated having a ‘classroom’ in which I could voice my concerns/questions about teaching, and to hear back from people from all different backgrounds and experiences.”
- “I feel a sense of loss to be losing touch with our Australian counterparts. It was wonderful to bridge our worlds, not only as citizens of different countries but as teachers in the making. I truly enjoyed the added perspectives given.”

### **Voice of the Experts**

As the inservice teacher experts engaged in the two-week ongoing discussion, they responded to questions, advanced the discussion of both preservice teachers and of other experts and shared experiences and resources. The following are a few excerpts from the “Endorsing Cultural Diversity” discussion forum to provide an example of the nature of the expert contribution. An expert explored the notion of the “delicate balance of tension between engaging with differences, and seeking common ground.” This expert went on to question “if it is possible to achieve that perfect balance in everything that we do?” In another thread an expert challenged preservice teachers to expand their thinking about cultural diversity. “What do we mean by ‘culture’? Often we identify external signs of cultural diversity (physical features, names, foods, languages). What about all of the diversity that is not so visible (such as beliefs, values attitudes, ways of relating, etc)? I wonder how we might acknowledge these?” Another expert asked, “Would there be a Canadian culture without our differences?”

Experts in an interview after the project were asked in what ways did they feel they contributed to the preservice teachers' theoretical and practical knowledge. The majority of the experts noted that they had contributed through asking questions, sharing personal perspectives and experiences and resources, and providing suggestions. One expert reported that the students did a good job engaging each other. She noted, "through some of the comments that I was able to make as an expert, more students engaged, it brought forth further questions from the students so I think there was a lot of give and take from both the students and experts."

When asked if they enjoyed working online with different groups of students and experts, the experts in the cultural diversity forum shared positive responses. For example, one expert "loved reading about the Australia perspective." She went on to say the project gave preservice teachers opportunity to talk with people outside of their district which gave "them a greater appreciation and a more global view of what's going on in the world." A second expert reported that "it felt very interdisciplinary" and that she was "reading postings from people that seem to come from a number of different contexts". She went on to acknowledge "there seems to be more diversity, so I really liked that."

Given their experience with the project, experts were asked to share recommendations to improve the project. There was no consistency in the suggestions. However, the following few examples provide a sense of the type of feedback received. One expert suggested including a novel that addressed indigenous perspectives. A second recommendation was to add a synchronous session for each theme area so as to provide another way to give the discussion more depth. A third suggestion was to extend the discussion time with the experts. One expert commented that this would give her "more time to respond back and forth to some people and go deeper, respond back with questions, rather than just wanting to make sure that I responded to them." A fourth expert acknowledged the project was "exceedingly well organized and effective" but was disappointed in that this person would have liked to have seen more responses from the experts. This expert recommended that more clarification with regard to the number or frequency of responses for the experts, along with some guidelines for what might be expected, may be helpful.

It has been exciting and rewarding to know that many of the experts were pleased with the experience and would volunteer for the project again. The experts supported the project goals and overall design. They commented that they had gained personally and professionally from their participation in the project.

### **Implications in Relation to Outcomes**

Our goal was to provide an innovative opportunity within the program structures in our two Faculties of Education for preservice teachers to develop their understanding and build their capacity for being culturally responsive, for teaching of diversity and for teaching in diverse classrooms. We acknowledge our project is a small component of the preservice teachers' education program. However, we have intentionally attempted to provide these future educators with "more exposure, more explicit modeling and demonstration, more cultural information and more candid conversations" (Sobel & Taylor, 2005, p. 86). Through our project and the evidence from the data that we have used to continually inform our work, we have strived to create a rich learning experience on three levels.

First, through the use of novels, resources and experts, preservice teachers were exposed to multiple perspectives and multiple resources designed to provide them with diversity in knowledge and experience. We wanted them to grapple with real-life issues by examining it from different points of view and to learn from various sources. For example, what can be learned from a colleague's narrative? What can be gleaned when linking what was learned from an academic resource to that of the lived experience? Further, what can be learned from the discussion with and among experts and colleagues? As stated in the reflection of one student, "One of the strengths of the project was the number of people online. Everyone was on, and everyone had an opinion, which gave everyone a contrasting view of the numerous books and topics."

Second, the authentic issues related to teaching and learning were central to the substantial conversations and valued by preservice teachers, experts and us, the teacher educators. It formed the foundation for sharing experiences, expertise and resources, and provided the catalyst for linking theory and practice. The example of the scenario

presented during the synchronous component of the project triggered a sense of dissonance. “[D]issonance is part of the process of authentic learning and requires the learner to gain various skills and information to address the problem” (Redmond & Lock, 2009, p. 269). For example, the scenario of the new immigrant, English as an additional language student who was to be placed in the preservice teacher’s classroom within the school year is a reality in many of our Canadian schools. Through this scenario, we challenged our preservice teachers, along with the help from the experts, to consider how they would create a learning plan for this child, how would they prepare the other children in the classroom to welcome and support the new student, as well as how would the preservice teacher prepare him-/herself to have the knowledge and skills to teach this child? Who would the preservice teacher seek help from to best support this child’s learning? We wanted to provide models of authentic learning experiences to raise awareness and understanding of cultural diversity, as well as to investigate what does this mean in terms of teaching and learning?

Third, participating in the project experience had ongoing benefits beyond the life of the project and our courses. Preservice teachers developed a new network of colleagues and experts to draw upon in the future. They had the lived experience of being online learners, online collaborators. They could use this model within their own classrooms as a means of bringing children from various locations and cultures together to learn *with* and *from* each other. They could use this model to not only access experts, but also to provide a forum where children from around the world could be collaborators and co-learners, exploring and discussing issues such as water quality.

## **Conclusion**

“Shifts in the ideological orientations and programmatic actions of teacher education needed to meet these demands will require commitments to cultural diversity at levels of intensity, depth and magnitude that far exceed anything done before” (Gay, 2011, p. 143). As such, we all have a role to play in helping our future teachers to develop “culturally responsive dispositions and teaching practices” (Kidd, et al., 2008, p. 328). Through our inquiry-based international project embedded within our curriculum

courses, we have provided an authentic learning experience to explore and challenge beliefs and attitudes, to raise awareness of and sensitivity to cultural diversity, and to help develop “culturally responsive practice” (Banks et al., 2005, p. 243).

To support a more systematic approach to building the capacity of teachers who are culturally responsive, we need to carefully consider how to scale up our project. First, include more preservice teachers in our programs to have the opportunity of the lived experience of being learners within an online global learning environment as they examine and develop greater understanding of cultural diversity. Second, encourage more inservice teachers to participate in the work so to enhance the breadth and depth of the diversity of expertise in the forums. Third, bring in additional voices of people with diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences from around the world to engage in rich authentic discussions. Therefore, we invite you to join us in this work to build the capacity of preservice teachers to be culturally responsive educators.

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