Negotiating Identity and Alterity: cultural competence, colonisation and cultural voyeurism

Andrew Hart and Jane Montague
Introduction

- **Work-Based Learning (WBL):** a vehicle through which students in health and social care develop culturally competent practices.
- Contingent on **Transformative Learning.**
- Development of new identity, not merely new skills (Mezirow, 1997). This is an ongoing process (Coleman et al, 2010).
- Cultural competence is not a bolt-on skillset or technique but is an ongoing inner and outer struggle – an ‘identity project’.
- Becoming culturally competent entails transformative learning: transformation of the self. This requires transformation of how the other is viewed.
Professional Identity

• A key purpose of WBL yet only vaguely defined.
• Limited understanding of the various processes involved in this.
• Various theoretical frameworks have been proposed but all are contested.
• Trede et al (2012) find “a remarkably disparate range of theoretical frameworks, indicating an underdeveloped field where there is little agreement amongst scholars.” (p.375)
Professional Identity

• Constantly shifting
• Achievement of status vs. a constant becoming?
• “Rather than help them build an armour that they can then face the world and their clients with over the course of their career, educators must now help students to see that they are constantly becoming professionals and that their identity development is increasingly fluid.” (Trede et al, 2012, p.382)
Rupture and identity

• The shift from understanding identity as fixed and stable to viewing it as a “fluid, multiple, fragmented, dialogical, constantly re-constructed and negotiated process.” (Märtsin, 2010, p.66)

• ‘Ruptures’ in an individual’s experiences trigger a reconfiguration of the self.

• Throws up possibilities for qualitative transformation – or uncertainties “that need to be overcome to re-establish the disturbed status quo in one’s self-system.” (Märtsin, 2010, p.77).
Alterity

- Lawler (2008): identity describes the extent to which an individual shares common features with and differences from others.

- “we gain our identity through placing ourselves as like and different to another.” (Treacher, 2006, p.31)

- The voice of the other questions and can even threaten the equilibrium of the self–system by inviting us to position ourselves in relation to it (Märtsin, 2010).

- Requires a recognition of one’s own subjective self in order to recognise the ‘other’.
Dialogue

- Reconfiguration and transformation of the self is dialogical: it involves shifts in understanding of the self and of the other.
- “the dynamics to dialogue are never power-free” (Hopkins, 2008, p.367), neither is dialogue a panacea.
- Dialogue can be empowering – giving voice to marginalised groups – or it can be oppressive by silencing or subverting such voices and narratives (Hopkins, 2008; Kirmayer, 2013).
- The desire for certainty and avoidance of discomfort can encourage silencing of the other.
Teacher/Student Trap

• Sakamoto and Pitner (2005): helping professions typically adopt a ‘top down’ approach.
• Attempts to reduce oppression can unwittingly lead to the ‘teacher/student’ trap.
• Expertise and knowledge are dispensed from above.
• The student can thus be seduced into modelling practice that privileges the expert and oppresses the client/service user.
Cultural Voyeurism

• A combination of curiosity or fascination with difference and a naive desire to ‘help’ or ‘rescue’ people who live in deprived communities, while assuaging guilt (Williams, 2008).

• Can also replicate these power relationships by positioning the student as ‘saviour’ or ‘spectator’ to the ‘needy’ or ‘oppressed’.

• The other is positioned as an object of fascination, exoticism or pity.

• ‘Help’ can disguise exploitation and reinforce a sense of power in student.
Colonisation

• In seeking a professional identity the student is willingly colonised by dominant values and narratives.
• Instead of engaging in dialogue with the other when faced with experiential ruptures, the student can seek the certainty and ‘armour’ of dominant voices.
• Reinforces existing inequalities and reduces the likelihood that the student will relinquish the power conferred on them by occupying their incipient professional role.
• Spectator/spectated relationship in which dialogue/discourse preserves inequalities rather than challenges them.
Addressing the issues?

• Fairtlough et al (2013): need for critical perspectives to permeate curriculum.

• Understanding and respecting ‘difference’ or ‘the other’: developing critical social consciousness and reflexivity. Alterity is essential.

• The role of cross cultural competence?

• ‘Cultural safety’ as an important aspect of the process. This includes an examination of the inequalities affecting the dynamics of the practice context (Ramsden 2002, cited in Racine and Perron 2011).
Conclusion

• Enable students to be more aware of these processes and contest them, adopting a fluid ongoing ‘professional identity’ rather than don a ‘suit of armour’ (Trede et al, 2012).

• The need for a “capacity for seeing ourselves in interaction with others and for entertaining another point of view whilst retaining our own, for reflecting on ourselves while being ourselves” (Britton, 1998, p. 87).”


References


