

Online Learning as a Solution for Cross-Cultural Development in Time Poor Environments

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INTRODUCTION

The synergies that relate staff development, on-line learning, anti-discrimination training and an indigenous employment strategy are not readily apparent. Faced with the problem of providing cross-cultural awareness training on a continuing basis in an environment that could not guarantee ready access to resources, Griffith University developed an innovative program to meet the challenges it faced in bringing these seemingly disparate areas together. The University's history is one of being innovative, creative, and multi-disciplinary in its approach, and the program that resulted from tackling what is becoming an increasingly common phenomenon, of providing effective staff development in a time-poor environment, is certainly characteristic of a Griffith approach.

Please Explain: Indirect Discrimination in the Workplace is the title of an online learning package developed jointly by the Office of Human Resource Management and Flexible Learning & Access Services at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia.

The program was developed in response to a need to raise awareness of cross-cultural issues and how they impact on the workplace. Initially the program was targeted for use by supervisors and managers working with Indigenous Australians, but as it developed it became apparent that its use extended far beyond that specific purpose. It does, in fact, provide a resource for anyone wanting to learn more about cultural interaction, or for people working with people from backgrounds and cultures other than their own.

Members of the team involved in this innovative project have often described it as the project that keeps on giving. In addition to the important and stimulating nature of the content and delivery mode of the program itself, the project was characterised by highly effective collaboration between the University's Equity team and the technical design and development team within the Flexible Learning unit – an unusual coupling

in normal circumstances. It is also an excellent example of a multi-media resource that is accessible to people with sight or hearing impairments that restrict access to technology.

This paper describes the context in which the project arose, and discusses the rationale behind the reflective learning model used to inform the design of activities and interactions contained within the resource. It also describes some of the key learning that emerged as a result of the collaborative development process.

GENESIS

Like many of the indigenous peoples of the world's countries, Indigenous Australians, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities of Australia, have suffered systemic and individual discrimination since Europeans first settled in Australia. The effects of this are seen most significantly in the areas of health, education and employment. Unemployment rates for indigenous Australians are significantly higher than non-indigenous people; in 2001 the unemployment rate for Indigenous Australians was 23%, compared with 7.4% for non-indigenous people. The imprisonment rate for Indigenous Australians, a factor that is often linked to a combination of education, employment and discrimination, is fifteen times higher than that of the non-indigenous population. In 2001 20% of the Australian prisoner population was made up of indigenous prisoners, whereas they represent only 2% of the total population. [Year Book Australia 2003]

In an attempt to begin to redress some of the previous actions of the past, and to address the ongoing impact of these, various governments have encouraged, and subsidised, organisations to establish indigenous employment strategies. This has occurred over the past decade or so.

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 that would help to sensitise university staff to matters and issues surrounding the employment of indigenous Australians. The original implementation plan of the employment strategy suggested that an Indigenous Australian Cross-Cultural Awareness Program be developed and included in the annual 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 in an educational institution where flexibility in releasing staff is limited were particularly problematic.

1. It is very difficult to enable 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.

To be effective in addressing long held and deep felt attitudes and behaviours such programs must go to the very heart of issues that cause prejudice and discrimination. (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 are 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 cultural difference.

“This involves the difficult task of changing people’s 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, and the knowledge that they presented a particular challenge, a task group consisting of four staff from the Office of Human Resource Management, two indigenous and two non-indigenous, commenced work on the project. From the outset it was determined that indigenous people must be an integral part of the development of each stage of the project. One of the key learning principles addressed through the package was the misconception that indigenous people have less ability than non-indigenous people. Thus, wherever possible the work of the project was undertaken by indigenous groups or individuals, debunking the myth by example.

The task group determined initially that the most enduring resource that could be developed would be a video with accompanying workbook and activities that would enable individuals or groups of staff to work through issues that needed to be addressed when confronting indirect discrimination in the workplace. Indigenous cultural issues were to be the vehicle by which the exploration of prejudice and its impact were first introduced and explored.

A search of existing 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 outcome. Scripts prepared by the task group members combined ideas from both indigenous and non-indigenous perspectives. The very process of sharing perceptions about each other's cultures was the first of many learning experiences encountered by those involved in the project. The assumptions underlying the different perceptions were explored through long and involved discussions, and formed the basis of the scenes depicted in the video.

One of the main challenges faced by the task group was how to express the misperceptions held in ways that were neither too confronting, thereby running the risk of provoking defensive responses and presenting a barrier to further learning, nor too bland, which could result in people missing the point entirely.

DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

The program *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.

The videotape was developed prior to the workbook. Both resources were developed within an overarching framework of desirable outcomes, and the process of ensuring that the products stayed true to the objectives required continuous review and quality assurance by key members of the project team.

Working from the scripts developed by the task group an indigenous film/video production company translated the ideas into a visual medium, using local indigenous actors. Artwork used in the video and workbook material was selected from a local indigenous artist. From the project teams' perspective, the "indigenisation" of the project was being maintained.

The development of the workbook presented conceptual and technical challenges to all involved. Cross-cultural learning entered a new phase for members of the respective teams – staff development and the University’s Flexible Learning Unit – as they grappled with turning conceptions into tangible experiences, and translating learning outcomes and technical theory into practice and products that were acceptable to two diverse cultures.

In order to achieve the program goals the workbook needed to stimulate a process of thinking, reflecting and self-questioning. Users were to be presented with ideas, concepts and information that they would interpret and apply to both professional and personal situations.

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 five factors identified by the original project team and referred to on page 4 of this paper. 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.

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).

Individualising the Learning

A reflective style of learning such as that promoted through this program is not suited to all people. In the same way that cultural identity is linked to personal history and upbringing, so too are approaches towards learning. Reflective learning that is recorded via a learning journal (as in the case of *Please Explain...*) exposes one’s 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 one unravels what Moon (1999) refers to as the "substance that drives the thinking - the experiences, beliefs, socio-political 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."

Unlike group learning situations, where attitudes and beliefs are exposed in workshop situations, learners using the *Please Explain...* program can choose to interact at their own level. Group learning situations may inhibit full exploration of deep-seated attitudes and prejudices through fear of ridicule, shame or embarrassment. With this program individuals can choose to interact with the material in the privacy of their own office or home. There is no requirement to share experiences with anyone, although there are obvious advantages in doing so. While the learning that they experience may be confronting at times, the introduction to the program alerts people to the fact that they will be looking at a number of work-related cultural issues in ways that may challenge some of their existing understanding, judgements, assumptions and behaviours. Through such an individualised approach it is possible to work through any feelings of discomfort, rather than allowing these to block further learning.

For learning to be effective and sustained 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).

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 facilitate reflection and the discovery of personal meaning" (p.3).

Requiring participants to record and 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.

Undertaking the *Please Explain...* program is not mandatory, however it is strongly encouraged, and will shortly form part of the University's orientation web site. The expectation will be that all new staff will work through the program.

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. However, as the project moved on, technology was advancing at a much faster rate, and by the time the design and development of print materials was completed, an additional phase was scoped and approved for implementation. This resulted in the production of an interactive web site and materials to support the initiative in all formats.

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 of 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. This stage of the project required the team to look at the content from a fresh perspective, in order to explore how best the on-line 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.

The workbook is available as:

- A printed, bound book - available from Griffith University's Office of Human Resource Management.
- 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 one would use a Word document, typing responses into the document itself and saving the workbook to the 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 workstation 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

Of course with more money the materials could have been developed more extensively – however Harvard Review type productions cost Harvard Review type money. Within the resource constraints operating on the situation, the project team felt that a very effective learning solution was developed to meet some complex learning challenges.

CONCLUSION

This project had a number of distinct phases: conceptualisation, writing, technical development and implementation. 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.

The program was launched in May 2002, and Griffith University is monitoring the use of it within the University. An online evaluation form has been included on the website to seek feedback from users. The ability to monitor numbers and locations of staff who access the program is available, and the program will be included as part of the formal orientation required to be undertaken by all new staff. Ongoing publicity/awareness about the existence of the program, via way of newsletters, all-staff emails, discussion at different forums, etc, encourage staff to go into the program. To date the University has also sold six packages to external organisations.

Please Explain... represents one approach to the constant dilemma of finding time to provide essential learning in an environment that increasingly sees blocks of time devoted to workshops as a luxury. It is not the perfect solution, and should not be seen as a stand-alone solution. In ideal worlds the program would be followed up by series of ongoing forums, discussions, and advanced workshops. In 2003 the Office of Human Resource Management is offering, for the first time, workshops on 'Working with Diversity' as part of its suite of staff development programs. The workshops will enable deeper exploration of values and attitudes, building on the foundations already covered in *Please Explain...*

The learning experienced by all members of the project team, especially the non-indigenous members, in the journey that was the development of this program would ideally be replicated by individuals and groups who use the program with genuine commitment. While this is unlikely to happen, it does reinforce the use of diversity within teams to promote real understanding of "difference". In an increasingly globalised and multi-cultural work environment anything that enhances our ability to achieve this level of understanding, and through it greater productivity and harmony, must be on the right track.

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