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**Students as producers and active partners in enhancing equality and diversity:
‘Culturocity’ at Canterbury Christ Church University**

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Abstract

Equality and diversity of truths, of opportunity, of outcome, of dignity and of identities lie at the heart of the idea of university (Wolff, 1992, p. 68). However, despite the fact that the UK ‘has well-established equality law and practice’ and the Equality Act 2010 requires universities to implement changes that protect their students and employees from various forms and effects of discrimination, ‘inequality remains, albeit often in more complex and subtle forms than have been understood before’, argues David Ruebain (2012, p. 3).

This study contributes to the discussion about equality and diversity practices in the university context by proposing strategies to embed into students’ learning community equality and diversity and subsequent graduate attributes. The case study is the Culturocity Project: an equality and diversity training initiative co-created by Dr Kasia Lech and a group of final-year students and graduates from Drama and Performing Arts programmes and delivered – as a Canterbury Christ Church University Partners in Learning project – to L4 and foundation-year students. The project was first delivered in 2015 and has now become part of student induction at the CCCU Faculty of Arts and Humanities.

Introduction

Equality and diversity of truths, of opportunity, of outcome, of dignity and of identities lie at the heart of the idea of university (Wolff, 1992). At the same time, the equality and diversity of people working and studying at universities may, at the very least, pose problems. Despite the fact that the UK ‘has well-established equality law and practice’ and the Equality Act 2010 requires universities to implement changes that protect their students and employees from the various forms and effects of discrimination, ‘inequality remains, albeit often in more complex and subtle forms than have been understood before’, argues David Ruebain (2012, p. 3). More recently, Dr Kehinde Andrews, the first professor of black studies in the UK, publicly accused British universities of ‘producing racism’ (Ross, 2016). The issue becomes

even more complex post Brexit and in general, as ‘the ever-changing national and international context’ has impact upon ‘compliance and best practice in the area of equality’. Nevertheless, diversity is a key quality that supports the recruitment of students and allows UK universities to compete in the global market; equality and diversity environments also enrich the student experience and increase staff satisfaction (Ruebain, op.cit., p. 5).

Equality and diversity have impact beyond legal and socio-economic contexts and touch scholarly excellence and both liberal and vocational education, provoking questions about inclusivity and community as central to the partnership of learners and teachers (Higher Education Academy, 2014). Moreover, Ruebain highlights that ‘individuals from diverse backgrounds contribute materially different ideas, perspectives, skills and knowledge’ (op. cit., p. 5). It has been established that individuals with protected characteristics may find the university setting more challenging than do their peers, with consequent impact on retention (Equality Challenge Unit, 2011). Yet the value of equal and varied environments is evident beyond university: more and more organisations and businesses are opening themselves to global markets, collaborating with diverse partners and understanding the legal and economic implications of inequality. With all that, comes a demand for employees with inter-cultural sensitivity and understanding. In other words, by engaging students with the ideas of equality and diversity, universities may improve the employability of their graduates.

These benefits of equality and diversity for both liberal and vocational education suggest the need to incorporate these areas into student experience – and teaching and learning in particular. At Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU), this conviction underlay Culturocity – an induction session on equality and diversity for new students, co-created and facilitated by current students and recent graduates. The project became part of the 2017 Higher Education Funding Council report on sector leading and innovative practice in advancing equality and diversity.

Culturocity at Canterbury Christ Church University

The approach to student partnership adopted for the Culturocity initiative mirrored that of CCCU as a whole and drew further influence from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) Framework for Partnership in Learning and Teaching (2014). Building on the work of Healey et al (2014, p. 7), we looked at the partnership as ‘a process for student engagement

understood as staff and students learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement’.

In their conceptual model for partnership in learning and teaching, Healey et al describe four overlapping areas of activity: learning, teaching and assessment; subject-based research and inquiry; curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy; scholarship of teaching and learning. At the centre of these four overlapping areas, they place ‘partnership learning communities’, which they describe as the processes by which the different types of partnership operate (op. cit., p. 25). Culturocity is a student-led induction activity which simultaneously engages participating students in matters related to their curriculum (subject-specific knowledge, perceptions of self and others, the role of implicit bias and values in determining the shape of human interaction, and so on) and proactively instigates a partnership learning community. Healey et al’s model provides a helpful lens through which to view the Culturocity initiative. However, Culturocity foregrounds and prioritises the partnership learning communities (rather than the areas of activity given prominence by the model) as a continuous and participative process. The HEA Framework (2014) emphasises that partnership in learning and teaching is more likely to be sustained when there is a strong community with shared values. Culturocity is an example of partnership in practice which is designed specifically to create a sense of community through shared values.

The project arose from discussions relating to a deficit of shared values within and between specific student groups. Initially, these involved academic and professional staff members who recognised the need for professional intervention. Students were offered professional Equality and Diversity training; however, they failed to engage with it fully, as they were preoccupied by the quality of acting (the session included short scenes enacted by actors) and how they themselves would have performed the roles. In response, Senior Lecturer in Performing Arts Dr Kasia Lech proposed that current graduates and final-year students should prepare and deliver to first-year students training on equality and diversity, so as to avoid similar difficulties in the future. Through discussions with Moira Mitchell, the CCCU Equality and Diversity Manager, and Kath Abiker, the Faculty of Arts and Humanities (FAH) Director of Learning and Teaching, it was agreed that the project should be student-led and, in 2015, the FAH Equality and Diversity Committee, supported by Phil Mooney and the University’s Partners in Learning initiative, invited Drama and Performing Arts students and graduates to create and deliver an equality and diversity development session to a selected group of L4 and foundation-year students.

Drama and Performing Arts students at CCCU are equipped with a unique set of skills particularly relevant to equality and diversity training. Throughout their Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Drama and Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Performing Arts programmes at CCCU, students are taught to apply their skills to non-theatrical contexts and to think innovatively about these contexts, including drama in education, corporate training, health setting or even football training. Moreover, Kaz Hayet and Sean Walton carried out research showing that drama-based training is a particularly ‘effective tool for delivering equality and diversity training’ that facilitates active engagement of participants, supports their learning, helps to manage emotional responses, enhances their interest in the session and, in particular, increases their ability and confidence to ‘challenge inappropriate behaviours in the workplace’ (Hayet and Walton, 2013, p. 290 and pp. 298-304).

The conception of Culturocity was underpinned by a development session with Moira Mitchell, at which the key issues were explored in depth from legislative and personal perspectives. Kasia Lech collaborated with students to ensure that their ideas were supported by appropriate applied drama frameworks and techniques. Kath Abiker provided support in relation to the CCCU and FAH strategy and quality frameworks. All staff involved were committed to the principles of partnership as set out in the University Strategic Framework (2015), the University Learning and Teaching Strategy (2015) and the HEA Partnership Framework (2014) and, in particular, to the importance of empowering students as authentic partners and co-creators, the ultimate expression of which was the co-presentation of the project at the RAISE 2016 conference in Loughborough and the co-publication of this paper.

After successful evaluation of the pilot, the Faculty introduced the project across other Schools during the 2016/17 Induction Week. The facilitators were recruited from schools across the Faculty and worked under the leadership of the previous year’s facilitators, supported by Kasia Lech. The brief asked the new facilitators to take forward the 2015 structure and work under the leadership of the 2015 facilitators to prepare and deliver Culturocity training. The new facilitators were also encouraged to contribute their specific skills and knowledge to the induction sessions, so they could be adjusted to the needs of students across various disciplines.

Rehearsing Culturocity: facilitator’s perspective

My motives to get involved in Culturocity were simple: ‘Great, this will give me some paid work after graduating and will look good on my CV.’ I was prepared neither for how this project would stir up my passion nor the personal journey it would take me on. Initially, I lacked confidence as to whether we would be able to deliver it, but the belief of our lecturer helped to push these initial thoughts to the back of my mind. We received training on the Equality and Diversity Act 2010 and our lecturer was available for support if we needed it. However, it was liberating to know that we were trusted with making this project our own: a truly student-led project with the trust that students can be the most effective means of communicating and teaching others. We nurtured this workshop for those exact reasons: it was our responsibility and our project.

Our aim as facilitators was to provoke awareness and self-reflection amongst our students, not only in relation to the Equality and Diversity’s protective characteristics but also the grey areas in between these, the less obvious actions of individuals surrounding discrimination, harassment and victimisation. In 2016, my role developed and I became a leader of one group of students whom I would train to facilitate Culturocity. This time round, my focus was to show them the workshop and its structure, but then to allow them to grow as a group and to make this workshop their own.

The brief asked us to use methods such as ‘forum theatre’. This technique was developed by the practitioner Augusto Boal. ‘Forum theatre’ allows participants to initiate changes to scenarios and for the audience to have an active role (Boal, 2000, p. 141). It is one of the techniques used by Boal for his ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ that, as Boal states, ‘in all its forms, is always seeking the transformation of society in the direction of the liberation of the oppressed. It is both action in itself, and a preparation for future actions.’ ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ does not simply aim ‘to interpret reality’; it wants ‘to transform it’. Through the creative process, we decided that we would use another Boal technique called ‘Invisible Theatre’, whereby the participants are not aware that they are watching a live performance (Boal, 2000, pp. 143-144). Our aim in using this technique was to create a platform for the students to generate a discussion amongst themselves that could encourage them to transform their reality.

Sessions and methodology

The facilitators used Invisible Theatre at the end of their sessions. The Invisible Theatre was preceded by other drama-based activities, slightly different for each team. They all offered a very good balance of activities requiring different types of learning; they were also delivered efficiently and in a well-structured way – important to highlight as evidence of the success of the peer-training approach; not all student-facilitators had previous experience in delivering workshops. Each session lasted, depending on the number of participants, around ninety minutes.

At the start of each, the facilitators introduced themselves, using casual photographs and random facts about their identity; in so doing, they contextualised the event and set an informal frame. The drama games that followed introduced the key ideas of the session in a very playful way. As a case in point, one of the activities (inspired by the children's warm-up game 'Fruit Salad') required all participants to sit on chairs, or stand, in place in a circle, except for one, left standing in the middle without a place. That person, the 'caller', in order to try to secure a place, had to call out a category applicable to herself/himself and possibly also to others already placed, such as 'anyone who wears blue' or 'anyone who has ever been abroad'. All those to whom the category applied, including the caller, then had to move, competing for a new place, thus leaving a new caller in the middle to call a new category. The facilitators taking part, when they were callers, deliberately moved the game on from simple statements about clothing and taste to statements about identity: 'anyone who is not British' or 'anyone who has a disability', and so on. The games were interspersed with discussions and more informative elements, like the Prezi presentation (used by all three facilitators' teams), which made use of multimedia, was aesthetically relevant and engaged the participants with such topics as identity-related stereotypes, the 2010 Equality Act and protected characteristics; in other words, it introduced social and legal aspects to the session. In the final parts of the session, the facilitators suddenly started behaving as if one of them had forgotten to bring something: they started bickering among themselves, making inappropriate verbal comments and non-verbal gestures behind each other's backs. The comments and gestures made in each team's piece may not have been the same, but, in general, they referred to gender, disability, age, and physical appearance stereotypes. This piece of Invisible Theatre lasted approximately four to five minutes.

The behaviour of the participants in the five sessions observed by Kasia Lech varied: some participants were clearly very uncomfortable; some were unsuccessfully trying to carry on with their conversations; some observed the facilitators discreetly; some were staring at them;

some were looking at the floor; some clearly saw nothing wrong with the comments. As soon as the facilitators finished and explained what the participants had just witnessed, some participants admitted that they had not seen anything wrong with the comments, whilst others were very vocal about their anger and their feelings of empathy with and sympathy for the facilitator who had been ridiculed – they certainly noticed the inappropriateness of the comments and admitted that they too felt vulnerable. In general, the discussions that followed the Invisible Theatre encouraged students to share, on a much deeper level, their own experiences of inequality. That a few students found it really uncomfortable may in fact confirm one of the strengths of the sessions. Gene Thompson-Grove argues that ‘being uncomfortable’ is an important part of education process (2014, p. xiv).

It is interesting that the comments relating to age were often not noticed by the participants, which suggests that, in future, age-related prejudices need to be more carefully embedded into the session. Dr Alexandra Polyzou, Senior Lecturer in Language, Communication and Applied Linguistics at CCCU, who observed a session, also suggested that more attention should be paid to inter-cultural communication and that facilitators should be careful that their language does not inadvertently exclude anyone, especially international students and non-native English speakers.¹ The facilitators should ensure that they explain all English idiomatic expressions used and their connotations. To do this would not only make the sessions more inclusive to non-native English speakers, but would also develop the inter-cultural communication skills of both facilitators and students. Dr Polyzou’s comment also confirms the value of the inter-disciplinary perspective that Culturocity offers.

Immediate and long-term impact

In 2015, Lucy Hoople, Precious Smith and Victoria Barrow-Williams (the facilitators) delivered seven foundation-year sessions across both the Schools of Music and Performing Arts and Arts and Humanities. Thirty sessions were delivered in 2016. Feedback from the participants was collected before and after each session in 2015 and 2016. Before each session, students were asked to write what equality and diversity meant to them; after the session, they were asked what they would take from the workshop. In addition, Kasia Lech has been observing one Drama year group which took part in Culturocity in 2015. After their first term in the University, students in this group were asked to write group contracts for one

¹ Polyzou, A. (2017) Email to Kath Abiker and Kasia Lech, 11 January.

of the modules and, in January 2017, they took part in a focus group discussion on Culturocity and their University experience.² Moreover, in January 2017, current L4 Drama and Performing Arts students were asked to fill a questionnaire on Culturocity and their University experience so far and this has provided rich data for reflection on the impact of the project.

Both in 2015 and in 2016, participants' feedback provided at the end of each session focused on three areas for which, in their opinion, the session had most benefit: learning about and understanding of equality and diversity in practice; emotional wellbeing; community building. The feedback pointed out some specific aspects of each of these areas that the participants found particularly important and beneficial:

- learning about and understanding of equality and diversity in practice
- importance of communication
- importance of language
- importance of non-verbal communication
- importance of body language
- the danger of assumption and judgement
- emotional wellbeing
- awareness of one's impact upon another person
- confidence to stand up for oneself
- de-stressing and relaxing
- confidence to recognise situation where equality and diversity are not respected
- community-building
- respect for diversity and differences
- sense of belonging
- helping to meet new people

These areas reflect the principles of the HEA Framework for Partnership in Learning and Teaching: authenticity, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, challenge, community and responsibility (2014). In particular, community-building took centre stage in both the

² Culturocity Focus Group (2017) 'Value and Impact of Culturocity.' 12 January 2017. Interviewed by Kasia Lech.

2015 and 2016 feedback, which is also important for the student experience and graduate attributes. As pointed out by Rush and Balamoutsou, students who are ‘positive about their identity as a member of a group’ and make friends engage with a learning community; they are ‘focused on learning; they ask questions in class; they feel comfortable contributing to class discussions; they spend time on campus’; they are also ‘motivated in some extra-curricular activity’ (2006, p. 4 cited in Trowler, 2010, p. 34). Moreover, as argued by Norman Jackson (2011), extra-curricular activities that relate to life-wide experiences, such as developing social networks, support graduates in their approaching post-graduation reality. It is also worth highlighting that in 2015 and 2016, participants gave reasons for why they had engaged with the material: it was fun, it resonated with personal experiences and they found it relevant to contemporary society. Equally important is the fact that, in both 2015 and 2016, new students commented that the session gave them the confidence both to recognise a situation in which they might witness or experience inequality, stereotypes and prejudices, and to have the right to react in it. This also links the project with the CCCU ‘Expect Respect’ campaign that the facilitators encouraged the new students to engage with. The campaign asks students to challenge bullying and harassment.

Longer-term data confirms the impact of Culturocity. During the academic year 2015/16, Kasia Lech led three out of six modules offered to Level 4 Drama students; during the first semester of the academic year 2016/17, she led two modules offered to Level 5 Drama students. All these modules involved group work and included large groups (six or more students). Over this period of time, there were no reports of any team-dynamic concerns in these modules, in striking contrast to the at-least-monthly group dynamics problems evident in the previous year groups. In January 2016, during the preparation for the ‘Theatres of the World’ group presentation assessment (Level 4, Drama), Kasia Lech asked students how they planned to ensure that their work would be collaborative and effective. In response, the students highlighted the need for open and clear communication, professional behaviour (avoiding personal jokes in particular) and respecting difference and using different abilities as an asset.³

In January 2017, the same group of students discussed their student experience so far in the context of Culturocity and their memory of it. Their responses related to the same areas arising from the short-term feedback: learning about and understanding of equality and

³ Theatres of the World (2016) [Canterbury Christ Church University. St Gregory's Centre for Music. 18 January].

diversity in practice (communication in particular), emotional wellbeing and community-building. One of the students, Michaella-May Thomas, offered a very interesting point: “At the end, people will remember not what you said, but how you made them feel.” The group also drew attention to the importance of using different abilities as an asset in a group work and as a platform for self-development, with one of the students saying that mixing with diverse people helped him to learn new things about himself.⁴

Comments obtained from the 2016/17 L4 Drama and Performing Arts Students (after their first semester at the University) echo the feedback from the previous year. Students made clear that Culturocity had increased their respect towards diversity, re-framed their interactions with other students and the University and given them confidence. It is particularly encouraging that international students commented on the value of the session: it made them feel part of the learning community. This links with observations made about Japanese students from Kansai University, who take modules from the School of Language Studies and Applied Linguistics (LSAL). Kansai Programme Director Antonia Linehan and Dr Polyzou both observed increased confidence and engagement in the group in comparison to those of previous years (Polyzou, *op. cit.*).

A few students said they did not notice any direct impact of the session on their student experience, but still stated that they had enjoyed it and that it had offered them a great opportunity to meet people. This, once again, points towards Culturocity as a platform for building community, which is important for student experience, as well as for student retention and graduate attributes, as already discussed. It may also open new avenues for drama and performing arts programmes in the context of employability, a matter of great urgency as it is increasingly more difficult for such graduates to survive by working in theatre. The memorability of the session, highlighted consistently across all comments collected, supports the claims of Culturocity’s long-term impact.

The participants’ perspective corresponds with what the facilitators experienced. Like fellow students and graduates here at Canterbury Christ Church University, I have also felt a beneficial impact upon my personal views about equality and diversity. The participants raised our awareness of aspects of this topic by courageously sharing their own stories. It was empowering indeed that they felt safe and brave enough to share personal stories about sexuality, race, religion, and bullying. And these students had only just met! The interest and

⁴ Culturocity Focus Group, *op. cit.*

support that Culturocity gained from the University's Partners in Learning initiative and the Faculty of Arts and Humanities Dean, made us feel that we had succeeded and were valued. Training others was also a new experience for me. It gave me a lot of satisfaction and raised my self-confidence – so much so, that I even went on to present on this project at the RAISE16 Conference: 'Excellence' in Student Engagement. I now work at the University as a Student Experience Officer and I believe that this project enabled me to build on my prior knowledge and to develop my mental maturity, both of which I feel helped me secure this role. This has been a personal journey.

The positive impact the project has had on the facilitators is also confirmed by lecturers. Antonia Linehan noticed increased confidence in the LSAL students who co-facilitated sessions in 2016.⁵ One of the facilitators who joined the project in 2016 also emphasised the direct impact that the sessions had on her engagement with the curriculum.⁶ It also seems that Culturocity encourages innovation and entrepreneurial spirit, as it shows students the possibilities of combining their unique skills and collaborating with seemingly-alien disciplines.

Last, but not least, Culturocity may also have a positive impact on a lecturer's workload. The equality and diversity event seems to have improved team dynamics in comparison to previous years and made the students more independent in their learning, which correlates with fewer emails and situations that require a lecturer's intervention.

Culturocity in the context of the University's strategy and policy

Culturocity and its impact bring together several aspects of CCCU strategies and policies, in particular Sustainability, Learning and Teaching Strategy and Student Experience. The policy statement declares the importance of recognising the development of a sustainable community that everyone can feel part of (CCCU 2015A and CCCU 2015B). Facets of the Culturocity project intersect and engage with concepts of inclusion central to this principle, as well as developing a sense of belonging, to ensure enhancement of the breadth and depth of community experience at the start of the students' academic journey (foundation year and L4). The first line of the Student Experience strategic aim is 'to work with students as

⁵ Linehan, A. (2016) Personal conversation with Kath Abiker, 1 December.

⁶ Ward, C. (2016) Email to Lucy Hoople. 13 December.

partners throughout the entire student journey from pre-arrival, through University study and on to graduation, employment and alumni engagement' (CCCU, 2015A)..

Moreover, Culturocity embeds several principles of CCCU Learning and Teaching Strategy simultaneously: whole-person development, building learning communities, students as partners in learning, innovative curriculum design and integrating graduate employability attributes (CCCU 2015B). In relation to the latter, Culturocity engages with a central question: How can we embed employability and prepare students for their transition into the world of work or postgraduate study through our teaching and learning strategies? In addition, the project links with the CCCU strategy to foster positive attitudes to cultural, individual diversity and inclusion and to adopt and implement innovative practices in teaching and learning (CCCU 2015A).

The project may also offer an innovative answer to supporting student retention and attainment. In particular, it actively nurtures the culture of belonging, sense of support and sense of community, relates to inductions, develops students' capacity to engage and involves both staff and students working together and being equally responsible for the shape of the CCCU learning community. This is especially important, given that the feedback seems to suggest that this project may benefit both student and staff satisfaction and may facilitate mutually-respectful student and staff relationships. For all these reasons, it feels very empowering to report that, currently, Canterbury Christ Church University is considering expanding the project beyond the Faculty in which it was initiated.

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