Barbara Waldhauser

Gender and Diversity Sensitive Teaching in International Weeks

115 - Successful Internationalization Of Higher Education

Abstract

International weeks are short-term mobility programs where students from different international universities come together to study for a period of about one week. This gives both students and lecturers very little time for adaptation. The short time frame is also particularly challenging when it comes to creating a gender and diversity-sensitive learning environment. The goals for gender and diversity sensitive teaching are creating an inclusive culture, supporting the diverse (academic) backgrounds, and including gender and diversity topics. This paper briefly outlines suggestions for meeting these goals. As these suggestions are predominantly experience-based, they are likely to show cultural bias. With this in mind, interviews were conducted with international lecturers who had taught in international weeks.

Keywords:

Short-term mobility, diversity teaching, teaching methods, gender sensitivity, thematic analysis

1. Introduction

International weeks as they are offered at the University of Applied Sciences BFI Vienna, are short-term mobility programs where students from different institutions come together to work and study for a period of approximately one week. The host institution designs a complete program consisting of lectures, classes, and a social program. There are variations on this, but mostly there is a strong focus on problem-centered learning where students in small, intercultural groups work together on a project or case. Lecturers take different roles in this setting. They might be in charge of organizing the academic program, they might provide input for a shorter session, or, they might be in charge of coaching the student groups while they work on their project, case, etc. Whatever their role, they work with a diverse group. The particular challenge during an international week is the short period of time. It requires quick adaptation from both students and lecturers and is thus different from everyday coursework (Waldhauser 2015).

In addition to the challenge of apparent diversity aspects – national background, language skills, etc. – lecturers in international weeks are also faced with more hidden aspects: a student's socio-economic

background might influence whether travelling internationally is no big deal or whether participating in an international week is his/her only opportunity for studying abroad; family responsibilities, age and other aspects influence a broader spectrum of interests which might make it more difficult for students to bond (Waldhauser 2015; Richter 2013). To deal with these differences and to help create a learning environment which allows all participants to benefit from the learning opportunities, an international week provides means for creating an inclusive, diversity-sensitive learning environment. Apart from creating the advantage of increased fairness, a diversity-sensitive learning environment also heightens students' motivation, creates an environment for more innovative ideas, and promotes a higher willingness for participants to take on stress (Boomers/Nitschke 2013; Lee et al. 2012). All these are factors that improve the quality of the learning outcomes of an international week.

To help lecturers in achieving this kind of diversity-sensitive environment, the University of Applied Sciences provides a set of suggestions in the form of short "Guidelines to Gender and Diversity Sensitive Teaching in International Weeks". This paper will present the suggestions in a shortened version of the existing document. As the initial goal of the guidelines was to provide workable suggestions, they are largely experience-based with some theory-based input. Consequently, it is culturally biased and overlooks how different teaching approaches provide different solutions. This paper will explore how lecturers from different institutions in Europe who have experience with this kind of short-term mobility view the challenge of gender/diversity sensitive teaching during international weeks, what suggestions they provide and whether the goal of providing workable suggestions was met.

2. Gender and Diversity in International Weeks

2.1. Gender <u>and</u> Diversity?

"Gender" is commonly considered an aspect of diversity and many organizations and companies include gender equality measures in their diversity activities. There are a number of reasons why gender and diversity should be considered separately. While there has been some overlap between gender and diversity historically, especially in Europe, development is mostly separate. Gender has predominantly been a topic of societal discourse – a criticism of society and the distribution of power between men and women. As such, the topic sometimes creates discomfort and is consequently pushed aside when other aspects of diversity are considered. Subsuming gender as one of several diversity categories assumes an equality of social categories which is not the case – "diversity categories are not gender-neutral concepts but gendered concepts" (Hanappi-Egger 2006: 129). On a practical note, there is a broad spectrum of research on gender sensitive teaching – some of which can be adapted and used in the context of diversity in general.

2.2. Defining Gender and Diversity

Gender refers to the socially constructed images and expectations towards men and women. Different to "sex" which describes the biological and physiological characteristics, gender is not naturally bestowed, but results instead from societal expectations. Societal gender roles and gender relations are a result of our images and expectations of how men and women should behave, which behavior, activities, and attributes of men and women are expected and accepted in a society. As gender expectations are shaped by society, these expectations are very much culture specific. They are learned through socialization. This means that gender expectations that are relevant in one culture do not translate to another. Gender role expectations are sometimes also linked to expectations of the teacher. Teacher-centered societies often hold strong gender stereotypes, in particular. Furthermore, there might be cultural differences when it comes to teacher-student boundaries that overlap with gender role boundaries. How appropriate is it in your culture to socialize with your students out of the classroom? Are there differences for men and women? Is it socially acceptable in your culture for a male student to touch the female lecturer's arm when asking a question? (Gopal 2011: 376).

Diversity refers to the large number of different characteristics we see in people. When we read or talk about diversity, these characteristics are often limited to gender, age, physical/psychological abilities, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity. These characteristics are sometimes referred to as the "inner dimensions" of diversity – a set of characteristics of a person that cannot be changed. Diversity does, however, include all aspects in which we differ and entails that even though we build categories for simplification, there are no two people who fit the same category. Two people who might be similar in one area (e.g. age) will differ in any of the other categories. Just as gender expectation varies, concepts of diversity differ from culture to culture. Similar to strong gender stereotypes, teacher-focused societies often hold specific expectations about the age (and experience) of the lecturer. Relatively young scholars might face difficulties being accepted as the teacher.

While a certain diversity in the student body comes with the territory of teaching in an international week (national background, language skills, etc.), the risk looms of potentially overlooking some of the more hidden aspects. Different socio-economic backgrounds might separate out those students for whom it is no big deal to go to a foreign country, from those participants for whom this international week might be the only opportunity to study internationally. Age, family responsibility and other aspects might create a broader spectrum of interests which students might initially impede the socializing process. This will most certainly influence group processes.

3. Gender and Diversity Sensitive Teaching in International Weeks

3.1. Goals of Gender and Diversity Sensitive Teaching

A gender and diversity sensitive educator needs to be aware of the influences diversity might have on him/herself, his/her students, the learning environment and therefore the learning experience in general. Teaching a gender and diversity-sensitive class means to take into consideration the needs of all participants rather than focusing on the "average student" only (similar: Tange/Jensen 2012). It gives all participants the opportunity to participate, not just the students who are quickest to answer our questions or those who are the most outspoken in a discussion. Finally, it provides a setting for students to improve their own gender/diversity awareness and competence by addressing gender/diversity aspects of their subject and/or group processes.

It is important to be conscious of expectations and stereotypes, in particular towards men and women, and to be aware of possible role expectations/stereotypes among our students. It is important to create a learning environment that does not reduce reality to traditional gender roles and stereotypes or uses stereotypical and/or sexist examples. Creating a safe and diversity-sensitive environment aims at reaching the following goals of gender and diversity-sensitive teaching:

- **Creating an inclusive culture**: by creating an environment that is non-sexist, non-discriminating, non-exclusive, we foster a welcoming learning culture that allows all students to engage in learning activities;

- **Supporting the diverse (academic) background**: by understanding that our students bring in a different background, we are able to create a course structure which all students can benefit from and that allows everybody to reach the goals of the course (no hidden curricula);

- **Including gender and diversity topics**: by including gender and diversity topics in our teaching and our material, we show our students that next to mainstream research, there are always several additional dimensions to any subject. In doing so we raise our students' gender and diversity awareness and teach them to see a problem from multiple perspectives.

3.2. Suggestions for Gender and Diversity Sensitive Teaching

The "Guidelines" contain a number of suggestions for meeting the above mentioned goals and will be presented here in an abbreviated form.

3.2.1. Creating an inclusive culture

The starting point for gender and diversity sensitive teaching needs to be self-reflection. The lecturer needs to understand his/her own perspectives on gender and diversity in order to be able to

understand how it affects our teaching. This self-assessment raises questions such as: "What is my role as a teacher and more specifically, how is my understanding of this role influenced by my socio-cultural origin, my gender identity, the colour of my skin, my religious confession / philosophy of life, etc.?", "What is my understanding of a 'good' student?", "In what way do stereotypes guide my expectations?" These considerations build on Bennet's Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennet 1986; Hammer et al 2003) which describes a continuous development of attitudes towards cultural differences, and assumes that with experience, people become more competent in dealing with cultural difference.

Next to the lecturer's attitudes towards diversity in the group, a number of teaching methods can be identified that can help create an inclusive environment. Implementing <u>Class Rules</u> is a relatively common practice when teaching a class (how will you deal with certain issues such as punctuality, coursework, questions, etc.). Including a commitment towards inclusiveness in this set of rules will raise awareness about diversity and inclusiveness among our students and ourselves. <u>Everybody needs to be heard</u>: Inviting all participants to introduce themselves allows each person to become visible in the group. It is the very first invitation to join group discussions and reduces barriers to engaging in other discussions later on. Gender and diversity aspects also need to be considered when the group mode is decided: do you work with <u>large group discussions</u>, <u>small working groups</u>, <u>one-on-one buzz groups</u>, or individual input through <u>flash feedback</u>? Large group discussions need to be moderated to ensure that no one who would like to participate is left out and that questions encourage students who normally would not participate. Small working groups might make it easier for students to participate who would not engage in a large group discussion. Buzz groups are another good way to get students involved who would not voice their opinion in a large group discussion. Lastly, the guidelines recommend <u>use of an inclusive language</u> as a means to create an inclusive culture. The tone is set in the classroom by employing a gender sensitive, non-sexist and anti-discriminatory language, encouraging the students to do the same, and supporting each other in doing so.

3.2.2.Suggestions for Supporting the Diverse (Academic) Background of Participants

When teaching a course, lecturers often assume students know "how things are done". These are the hidden rules, procedures, etc. referred to as <u>hidden curriculum</u>. This is particularly problematic in a short-term mobility program – students just do not have the time to figure things out on their own. This is why the guidelines suggest providing <u>structural/organizational support</u> to help students uncover the hidden curriculum: clear goals, clear structure, clearly defined requirements, information on when and how the lecturer wants to be contacted, etc. Next to structural/organizational support, it is important to provide time and structure for students to tap into <u>peer support</u> and to make sure that all students have access to peer support. While there is a good chance that students bond in social activities, there are always some students who – for different reasons (age, religion, or care-giver role) – are less likely to

participate in parties. It is thus the role of the lecturer to provide an opportunity for teambuilding and bonding activities in class as well.

3.2.3.   Including gender and diversity topics

The third level of gender and diversity sensitive teaching is the inclusion of gender and diversity topics in your course. This will – sometimes for the first time – introduce students to new perspectives apart from mainstream research and allows them to understand that there are always several more dimensions to any subject. This will raise students' gender and diversity awareness and teach them to see a problem from multiple perspectives.

4.   Results from the qualitative interviews

Three interviews were conducted with lecturers from Finland, Romania, and the Netherlands. The interviewees and the author have worked together on a short-term mobility program with a focus on diversity management: Students and lecturers come together every year at a different school; students are grouped in culturally mixed groups to work on a case study focusing on a diversity category. Each lecturer facilitates one group. Based on the general topic of the program, a basic understanding of diversity is assumed. The interviewees were first asked to describe their understanding of a gender and diversity-sensitive environment. In a second step, the lecturers were presented with a .pdf copy of the "Guidelines to gender and diversity-sensitive teaching" and asked to comment on them. The interviews were conducted via skype, transcribed and further explored in a thematic analysis (Aronson 1995). The small number of interviews limits the results from the qualitative study, but still provides some insight on how the existing Guidelines can be evaluated and further developed.

With regards to the lecturers' perspective on a gender and diversity-sensitive environment, three major themes emerged: a friendly, light atmosphere; a focus on language skills; and culture and age as predominant diversity categories. The issue of creating a good atmosphere was raised by all interviewees. While none of them described this as something they did with diversity in mind, one interviewee mentioned a friendly environment as the prerogative for students to engage in discussions. This is closely linked to the focus on language skills – a good atmosphere allows students to overcome shyness that is linked to poor language skills. With the setting of a short-term mobility program in mind, all interviewees highlighted culture as the dominant diversity category they considered during their teaching. In addition to that, two lecturers also mentioned age as an issue that had affected group dynamics in the past.

The perspectives of the interviewees on the guidelines were less clear and strongly influenced by the relationship to the author of this paper. The dominant theme was one of positive appreciation with two subthemes: recognition of aspects described and "aha"-moments. Next to that some specific suggestions for amendments were made which had one dominant theme emerging: differences in

distance between lecturer-student. Among the aspects the lecturers recognized was the description of the "average student". While the specifics of the stereotypical average students varied, all interviews recognized this tendency. Two interviewees described the suggestions for self-reflection of the lecturer as "aha"-moments – something they had never thought about "but makes perfect sense". The one suggestion that was raised by all interviewees was to include more specific suggestions on ice breaker/team-building activities. Some of the suggestions showed that clear differences emerged with regards to the emotional distance the lecturers felt comfortable with.

5. Conclusion

This paper presents an abbreviated breakdown of the Guidelines for Gender and Diversity Sensitive Teaching in International Weeks (Waldhauser 2015). Gender and diversity-sensitive teaching should follow three goals: creating an inclusive environment, supporting the diverse (academic) backgrounds, and including gender and diversity topics. The suggestions for reaching each of these goals are largely based on practical experience of the author, which is why they are culturally biased. Interviews were conducted to explore how lecturers from other European cultures with this kind of short-term mobility view the challenge of gender/diversity sensitive teaching during international weeks and if the presented Guidelines provide workable suggestions. Based on the small number of interviews conducted, no general conclusions can be drawn. The interviews showed that the assumption that lecturers teaching in international weeks focus only on some diversity aspects was correct. Presented with the guidelines in writing, the interviewees recognized some of the phenomena described and expressed their appreciation for the suggestions. To further explore whether and how any of the suggestions are put in practice, further research would be necessary.

References:

Aronson, Jodi (1995): A Pragmatic View of Thematic Analysis. In: The Qualitative Report, 2(1), 1-3.

Bennett, M.J. 1986. A developmental approach to training for intercultural sensitivity. International Journal of Intercultural Relations 10: 179–95.

Boomers, Sabine/Nitschke, Ann Kathrin (2013): Teaching in the Light of Diversity - Recommendations for Holding Classes with Heterogeneous Groups of Students. Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, http://www.fu-berlin.de/en/sites/diversitaet-und-lehre/downloads/Teaching_in_the_Light_of_Diversity_-_Recommmendations_for_Holding_Classes_with_Heterogeneous_Groups_of_Students1.pdf (10.12.2015)

Crose, Brian (2011): Internationalization of the Higher Education Classroom: Strategies to Facilitate Intercultural Learning and Academic Success. In: International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education 23 (3), 388-395.

Gopal, Anita (2011): Internationalization of Higher Education. Preparing Faculty to Teach Cross-culturally. In: International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education 23 (3), 373-381.

Hammer, M.R., M.J. Bennett, and R. Wiseman. 2003. Measuring intercultural sensitivity: The intercultural development inventory. International Journal of Intercultural Relations 27: 421–43.

Hanappi-Egger, Edeltraud (2006): Gender and diversity from a management perspective: Synonyms or complements? In: Journal of Organisational Transformation and Social Change 3 (2), 121-134

Lee, Amy/Poch, Robert/Shaw, Marta/Williams, Rhiannon (2012): Engaging Diversity in Undergraduate Classrooms. A Pedagogy for Developing Intercultural Competence. In: ASHE Higher Education Report, 38/2

Richter, Regine (2013): Vielfalt gestalten. Konstruktiver Umgang mit Heterogenität in Lehrveranstaltungen, 2. Auflage, in: Tübinger Beiträge zur Hochschuldidaktik, 9/2, http://tobias-lib.uni-tuebingen.de/volltexte/2013/6876/ (10.12.2015)

Tange, Hanne/Jensen, Iben (2012): Good teachers and deviant learners? The meeting of practices in university level international education. In: Journal of Research in International Education 11 (2), 181–193

Waldhauser, Barbara (2015): Guidelines to Gender and Diversity Sensitive Teaching in International Weeks. Wien: University of Applied Sciences BFI Vienna