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`What Price Respect` - Exploring the Notion of Respect in a 21st Century Global Learning Environment

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the meaning of respect in a 21st century global learning environment, with a view to exploring the implications for promoting harmonious working relationships among students of culturally diverse ethnic backgrounds in the classroom. Research conducted since 2005 that investigates the understanding, meaning and experience of respect between final-year undergraduate students on a consulting to business module, provides the context for this paper. The methodology consists of the following four consulting teams of volunteer focus groups, comprising of between four and seven students each, over a two year period of the study that includes two phases (based on two focus groups per phase). Each team is made-up of students from different ethnic minorities and cultures and of mixed genders, aged between 22 and 43 years. The focus group sessions are conducted weekly or fortnightly over a 28 week period (the life of a module in an academic year) with each session lasting 30 minutes or an hour, which are also videoed. These focus groups are facilitated using a collaborative dialogue research approach which as acknowledged by Kitzinger 1995 who stated that “although group interviews are often used simply as a quick and convenient way to collect data from several people simultaneously, focus groups explicitly use group interaction as part of the method”) and share stories of respect and disrespect as they emerge and affect them.

I draw on the work of Prado (2006), Cohen (2001), Langdon (2007) and Noddings (2005) to explore definitions of respect research and provide a framework for discussion and analysis.

I intend to disseminate findings from this research that reviews perceptions and attitudes to respect and their impact on beliefs and behaviour of the students in the study. The aim is to improve interaction and dialogue while promoting a positive approach to cultural difference. A review of historical concepts of respect is conducted to determine its influence in today's 21st century global age. An exploration of key factors regarding the notion of respect will also be discussed.

Langdon (2007) intimates that research evidence indicates that whilst acknowledgement of respect is frequently reputed to be the driving force in improving situations where there is conflict or a need for dialogue, there is limited evidence to show that its relevance and effects have been assessed.

This is something I intend to do in this paper.

Findings to date indicate that respect is an important shared value for members from culturally diverse learning environments. The research findings also show that respect has a common meaning for those with similar cultural upbringing. That is, those students from collectivist societies (using Hofstede 2001, `Three levels of Human Mental Programming` Values and Culture mode model). According to Hofstede, (ibid) "at the collective level, most or all of our mental programming is learned, which is shown by the fact that we share it with people who have gone through the same learning processes but who do not have the same genetic makeup". Those from collectivist societies are therefore likely to exhibit the same or similar attitudes and behaviour towards respect such as, respect for extended family members and for members from their minority ethnic group. Initial findings suggest that these behavioural characteristics remain fairly consistent over different generations though marginal change is evident amongst second generations. This suggests that perceptions of respect are culturally situated and reinforced and can make behavioural change problematic. However, an awareness of difference based on facts, qualitative experience, rather than fiction or stereotypes are possible drivers for a positive approach to respect that can shift behaviours and mental models which Senge (2006) refers to as "internal pictures of how the world work" (pp. 163).

The significance of respect from a global educational perspective is therefore crucial in society today.

Introduction

A 21st century global society brings with it a learning environment of those of diverse cultural backgrounds. In turn these differences can harness the same, or dissimilar, beliefs about respect and disrespect. Therefore it should come as no surprise to learn, that “the subject of respect and its opposite, disrespect”, is reputed to be “omnipresent today” (*Quaquebeke, Henrich & Eckloff, 2007*). This sentiment suggests that the subject of respect is crucial in today’s diverse world, and “has great importance in everyday life” (*Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2007*). As such, the topic of respect is likely to be a theme of ongoing debate. A review of literature shows that “major religious and philosophical texts including the bible and Koran, include respect as a fundamental and moral value, and show that respect is frequently reputed to be the driving force in improving situations, where there is conflict or a need for dialogue”. However, “there is limited evidence to show that its relevance and effects have been assessed” (*Langdon, 2007*).

Furthermore, research evidence suggests that disparate perceptions of the concept `respect` may have an impact on learning in the classroom, particularly as it requires being “interactive and reciprocal” (*Bergum & Dossetor, 2005*). More often than not, these interactions are likely to be with those of both ethnic and cultural difference, thus increasing the likelihood of dissimilar perceptions of respect.

A review of literature follows to identify historic and current definitions of respect from various perspectives, which are then evaluated and discussed with a view to gaining greater understanding of a topic that is the basis of much debate. A detailed description of the methodology used to conduct the author’s study that investigates the relationship between respect and culture then follows. The findings of the study, is presented in the next chapter. This section initially provides context to the research by highlighting the ongoing conflict that arose among culturally diverse students, studying together on a consultancy module at an international higher education institution. It was this conflict that led to this research. The findings from the first phase is then presented and evaluated. This is followed by the concluding

section that provides a summary, prior to discussing how the findings of the study can be used to promote greater awareness of cultural difference. The intention is to utilise this knowledge to encourage a positive approach to respect among diverse learners in the classroom, to harness harmonious working relationships.

Literature review and discussions

A review of literature identified several definitions of respect, which according to Cohen (2001), "is a sentiment of one individual toward another". On the other hand, Palmer-Jones and Hoertdoerfer (2008), in their paper titled `Lets Talk About Respect`, define respect as being "a way of feeling and a way of behaving". In this paper they also make reference to Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, which they say offers two synonyms for respect, that is, "consideration, meaning an act of giving particular attention; And, esteem", seen as "high or special regard". These two terms in addition to Palmer-Jones, and Hoertdoerfer's definition, are indicative of both a reciprocal and interactive process, linked to an emotional paradigm based on a need to behave mindfully in view of the feelings of others.

Munn (1946), Young (1943), and Hebb (1949) cited by Frijda (1986), in his book, `The Emotions - Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction`; acknowledge that emotion "has often been defined as disturbance" that trigger a myriad of different feelings, whether positive or negative. This would arguably explain the physiological manifestations observed as a result of these disturbances noted from my study, that otherwise have no evident physical irritant. Frijda (ibid) is of the same sentiment, as he believes "there exists, physiological upheaval that, on the face of it, does not appear to have a sufficient cause in physical events, either to the subject himself, or an outside observer". Frijda goes on to give an example of, this phenomenon by making reference to "sweating or trembling without heat or cold or physical exertion". Frijda believes that "such changes tend to follow physiological causes", and that these changes, too, ask for explanations." He concludes by stating that "the notion of emotion is one kind of explanation and, we may assume, invented or at least employed for that purpose." It could therefore be argued that emotions can be instigated by feelings of respect or its opposite, disrespect.

As stated by Cohen (2001), if respect is “a sentiment of one individual to another” and as such is of a reciprocal nature, then it is plausible as Prado (2006) argued, to believe that “this reciprocity is the essence of a multicultural society.” And that “without it all that happens is that different groups’ cultural values and practices are more tolerated than respected by others”. Frijda (1986), refers to two sentences drawn from Raatma’s children’s book as cited in, ‘The Emotions - Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction’, to reflect his understanding of respect, which state, “respect is believing in the worth of others;” And, “respect means treating others as you want to be treated”, which is beyond the realms of just tolerance.

When considering tolerance in the context of respect, it is worthy to heed Prado’s (2006), warning where he states “where there is only tolerance of others. And where there is only tolerance of others’ values and practices, there is no genuine multiculturalism”. We could also ask, whether tolerance without respect in a multicultural society is sustainable, and if no why not? Perhaps the answer lay in the speculation that tolerance could be a manifestation of either: indifference, hostility, or anger, towards those of cultural dissimilarity, perhaps due to incorrect perceptions of those of difference. This is intimated by the Indian religious leader, Mahatma Gandhi, in one of his famous quotes where he says; “Anger and intolerance are the twin enemies of correct understanding” (about.com, 2009). Therefore it would be wise not to assume that tolerance is a reflection of ‘truth’, as being tolerant does not suggest true understanding, neither does it mean acceptance.

According to *Quaquebeke, Henrich & Eckloff, (2007)*, Acceptance relates to “the question of who one wants to have in one’s group” and that Acceptance as a term is a little vaguer because it has, at least to their “knowledge, never been explored by philosophers at any time.” *Quaquebeke et al*, go on to explain that “the word itself can be derived from the Latin ‘accipere’ which translates ‘to embrace or adopting’”. They also suggest that the core issue of accepting people is dependent on their embracement as part of the subject’s group and “as such it is different from toleration which only entails a presence in the subject’s space of perception without any assignment of membership”. This said the suggestion is that tolerance is neither an

indication of care for cultural difference. Instead tolerance could be indicative of a concern.

As acknowledged by Frijda (1986), "certain words seem to come up whenever we talk about respect" such as what he refers to as attention, consideration, courtesy, and care; All of which could be considered as being important in an educational sphere. Noddings (2005), is of a similar mindset and notes "it is sometimes said that `all teachers care`" which could be viewed as an ideology, and that "It is because they care that people go into teaching". This might be true in part, however as acknowledged by Noddings (ibid), "this is not universally true. But even for the majority who do `care` in the virtue sense-that is, they profess to care and work hard at their teaching-there are many who do not adopt the relational sense of caring" which in essence regarded as being the respectful thing to do.

Noddings (ibid) argues, those who do not adopt a relational sense of caring; "in the sense that they conscientiously pursue certain goals for their students, and they often work hard at coercing students to achieve those goals", that, "these teachers must be credited with caring in the virtue sense of the word. However, these same teachers may be unable to establish relations of care and trust" (ibid), which could be due to a lack of awareness, thus suggesting an inability to be au fait with the impact of the beliefs and values of those of cultural difference in the classroom. This might warrant a need to understand what they mean by respect as a driver for achieving relations of care and trust.

Palmer-Jones, and Hoertdoerfer (2008) believe that, "*Respect*-the word seems so common, yet so abstract" and that, "many of us adults may have trouble defining it. If asked, we might protest that "we know it when we see it or feel it"-or more likely, we will point to a hundred daily occurrences at home or at work, in the media or on the street when we feel respect is *absent*", let alone if we feel it is absent in the classroom. This was a key issue for the students involved in this study of respect in the context of culture; which according Hofstede, (2001), is a "word that can be applied to any human collectivity or category".

Methodology

The methodology selected for this study, is based on an investigation that adopts a qualitative, and collaborative action research approach with both researcher, and consultancy students. This collaborative liaison made use of audio visual recordings, observations of interactive behaviour, and by listening to the students' stories, conversations, and discussions, during research focus groups sessions. These video recorded sessions, were with two culturally diverse groups of undergraduate students, who were volunteers from Middlesex University Business School's, final year undergraduate consultancy module. The module that attracted more than 150 students per year requires students to work in teams of four to seven individuals, to provide a real-life consultancy service. The majority of the students' ages ranged from 21 to 23 years, with some mature students, aged 28 to 43 years.

At the onset of the module, the students were asked to form their consulting teams, using the criteria of mixed gender, mixed ethnicity, mixed age, and with those residing in close proximity. Two of these culturally diverse teams comprising of up to seven students each, participated in this two-year study (2007 to 2009), by organising two research focus groups.

Figure 1 below provides a breakdown of each focus group member's ethnic origin, generation status that is international overseas students, UK students, or UK students born to international overseas parents; their gender, as well as their age.

Figure 1:

Key: F1 denotes the first focus group and (F2) relates to the second focus group

Breakdown of focus group students' background				
First Focus Group				
	Ethnic origin	Generation status	Gender	Age
(F1) 1	Black East African of Ugandan & South African parentage	First generation overseas international student	Male	23 yrs
(F1) 2	Black West African of Nigerian parentage	Second generation UK student	Male	22 yrs
(F1) 3	Black East African of Eritrean parentage	First generation overseas international student	Male	23 yrs
(F1) 4	Asian of Sri Lankan parentage	First generation overseas international student	Female	23 yrs
(F1) 5	Black Afro-Caribbean of Barbadian parentage	First generation overseas international student	Female	43 yrs
(F1) 6	Mongolian Asian of Chinese parentage	First generation overseas international student	Male	23 yrs
(F1) 7	Spanish of Asian Indian parentage	Second generation overseas international European	Male	23 yrs
Second Focus Group				
(F2) 1	White British of English parentage	First generation UK student	Female	23 yrs
(F2) 2	Black North African of Moroccan parentage	First generation overseas international student	Male	23 yrs
(F2) 3	Asian of Egyptian parentage	Second generation UK student	Male	22 yrs
(F2) 4	Mongolian Asian of Chinese parentage	First generation overseas international student	Female	22yrs
(F2) 5	Black East African of Zimbabwean parentage	First generation overseas international student	Female	24 yrs
(F2) 6	Mongolian Asian of Chinese parentage	First generation overseas international student	Male	23 yrs
(F2) 7	Asian of Pakistani parentage	Second generation UK student	Female	23 yrs

As shown in Figure 1 above, the participants' ethnic and cultural origins were quite diverse. That is, five were of black African origin, three were Asian, one was white

British, three were Mongolian Chinese, one other was black Afro-Caribbean, while another was European of Indian Asian origin. This figure also shows that nine of these participants were first generation international overseas students (born outside of the UK). Three were second generation born in the UK to overseas parents, one was a first generation UK born white British student, while another was a second generation European born student of overseas parentage. This dynamic is reflective of the university's student community. Eight of the participants were male, and six were female and there was a mix of both sexes in each of the focus groups.

The focus group volunteers, consisted of students enrolled for the September 2007 module cohort, taught over 28 weeks, which is an academic year. The students took charge of these focus group sessions, by deciding when they would run, how long each session would last, and what aspect of respect they would discuss in each one. The students agreed that the sessions should be conducted directly after their module workshop classes, which was one day a week. They also decided that the focus group sessions should take place weekly or once a fortnight, and should last for half an hour, or an hour each. The students' dialogues were based on stories shared regarding several topics based on respect or disrespect. Such as: life experience, upbringing, expectations, and their attitude compared to that of others, in addition to other related topics. Although on occasion the students would agree on a topic that they intended to discuss prior to a focus group meeting, more often than not, they would abandon this agreement and instead respond more spontaneously by deciding what to discuss on the day during these sessions, as they saw fit.

There were eight video recorded focus group sessions in this first, of two phases of the study (2007-2008), which began in the first week of October 2007. This first phase concluded in May 2008 and lasted for a period of six months. At the end of this first phase, the work recorded was played back to the participants to facilitate their learning, and to capture additional rich research data. This was used as a means for understanding what respect means to the participants, and how it manifests in a learning environment. Evmorfopoulou (2000) believes that "focus groups create a line of communication. This is most obvious within the group itself,

where there is continual communication between the moderator and the participants, as well as among the participants as well.” On the other hand Kitzinger (1995) regards focus groups as a research method, as being “particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way”.

The author acknowledges that the research, though presented in a traditional manner, in that it takes the form of written text, is nonetheless, drawn from findings elicited from video recordings based on observations of student discussions in addition to their interactive behaviour. The video recordings of these discussions and conversations, revealed both the author's, and the students living contradictions regarding what both parties say about respect; in comparison with what they do in practice. This is observed and commented on by the students as they watch and reflect on these videos, as part of the action research process.

With this (action research process) in mind, the author draws on the works of Jean McNiff, (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002) who makes reference to fellow research collaborator, Jack Whitehead's notion of living contradictions. McNiff (ibid) quotes Whitehead by saying that he “regards the identification of a concern as methodologically central, because it raises the idea of the `I` as a living contradiction”. McNiff (ibid) continues by saying that Whitehead believes that “the living `I` should be placed at the centre of educational enquiries”, with a view to reflecting on ones' own practice “not as an abstract personal pronoun, but as a real-life human being. As a human being living and working in social contexts”, McNiff admits that she also “experiences herself as a living contradiction in that she says one thing and does another”. This was something that the students and author observed while watching and listening to themselves in action, in the visual video recordings as described in the findings of this paper.

The research methodology focuses on students enrolled on a final-year undergraduate consultancy module at Middlesex University Business School in north London, studying at a 21st century higher education international institution that attracts learners from each corner of the globe. The research draws on data since

2005 that showed a history of conflict that arose among the consulting students. This resulted in ongoing complaints about disrespect or, a lack of respect, which formed the basis of this study. This paper is based on the first of the two phases of this research, conducted over 28 weeks (an academic year), from 2007-2008.

Findings and discussions

As identified by Begum, & Dossetor (2005); and Quaakebeke et al (2005), the findings show, that “disparate perceptions of the concept `respect` does have an impact on learning in the classroom”. This was evidenced from data collated from observations made, and by listening to video recorded discussions and conversations of students in focus group sessions. This was also supported by findings elicited from the students’ individual learning review essays, where they are required to discuss what they have learnt from their experience while enrolled on the consultancy module. The ensuing evidence suggests, as concluded by Quaakebeke et al (2005) that “the subject of respect and its opposite, disrespect”, is reputed to be “omnipresent today”. Langdon (2007) also believed that “respect permeates culture” which he also acknowledged was “used frequently in the vernacular and psychological literature”. Again, the relationship between respect and culture was evident from the findings of this study, which are presented and discussed in detail below.

History of conflict among culturally diverse students’

This study arose from complaints of disrespect, and a lack of respect, due to growing hostilities that led to conflict over numerous years (2003 to 2006), among culturally diverse teams of students, working together on the final-year undergraduate consultancy module at Middlesex University Business School. The conflict which was ongoing, was evident in the classroom, and was greater among those consulting teams that were more culturally diverse. The hostilities between the students’ had an impact on their team working relationships that led to an inability to produce work that was reflective of the teams’ true ability. They were also unable to meet set assessment deadlines, due to an unwillingness to work collectively, thus preferring to

work in isolation on what were in essence team related tasks. Simon & Stürmer (2003) conducted experiments that explored respect in the context of group behaviour. Their evaluation “examined how disrespectful vs. Respectful treatment, and negative vs. positive performance evaluation, both received from the same fellow group members, affects collective identification and willingness to engage in group-serving behaviour”.

The ongoing hostilities among the students had an impact on team morale, and their assessment grades. The students also expected their workshop tutor, (who was often bombarded with constant complaints) to intervene and resolve the conflict that occurred with those of difference on their behalf; or agree to their demands to be moved to another consulting team that often disrupted the development of these other teams, thus leading to more complaints. This scenario put added pressure on tutors.

It was evident that the ongoing conflict that occurred among the consulting teams, needed to be addressed in order to prevent the situation escalating further, and to nurture harmonious team working relationships. But how was this to be achieved? It would seem the answer lay in the basis of the students’ complaints. That is, in excess of 85% of the students’ complained to tutors that they were being disrespected by those of cultural difference, or, that these individuals, lacked respect (for them), thus placing blame for the conflict, at the other person’s `door` and vice versa. This module related scenario (team conflict among students of diverse cultural backgrounds, accusations of disrespect or a lack of respect) suggested that respect was possibly a core and significant value for the students, irrespective of their cultural backgrounds or ethnicity, and as such, rendered this notion worthy of further exploration.

The students’ accusations of “disrespectful” or “a lacking of respect”, were raised in team meetings with their tutor, organised to help resolve the conflict among members that often remained unresolved. The students’ accusations were also documented in their individual learning review essays, which was the only piece of assessed work that was not team focussed. These complaints supported the notion

that respect might be a core value, which according to Merriam Webster’s dictionary (2009) is a Middle English word dating back to the 14th century, meaning among other things subject to relevance, “something as a principle or quality that is intrinsically valuable or desirable”. According to Kluckhohn (1951/1967) “a value is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of actions” (pp.159-160) However, further investigation was required in order to ascertain whether this, that is, respect being a core value for the students, was indeed the case.

Students’ list of values and perception of cultural difference

The emergence of further evidence suggested that respect for the students on the consultancy module, was a key value. This data was collated from findings from a values exercise developed and, used since September 2003, as a means for indentifying what the students regarded as being their top three values. This was rated based on their importance and significance; both from a personal and a consultancy team perspective. This exercise, required the consulting students to firstly devise a list of their individual values as they saw fit, before discussing these values with the other members of their consultancy team. They were then asked to decide, and agree on a list of team values in priority order, based on the number of times that a value was noted on each person’s individual values list. This team values list was then used as a basis for developing a team contract for conducting the consultancy task. The outcome revealed that for the participants’ (more than four hundred over a period of three year period from 2003 to 2006), respect was listed as the number one most important personal, and team value. This was followed by security and trust, independence and honesty, which were listed in second and third place respectfully.

The findings from the values exercise provided further proof suggesting that respect for the students, irrespective of cultural backgrounds and ethnicity was indeed a core value. Perhaps this should come as no surprise when as Haydon (2006) acknowledges, “respect for persons has to take a person’s cultural context into

account”. However, in order to address conflict for promoting harmonious team working relationships among students of difference in the classroom, the author acknowledged that it was important to identify what the students understood respect to be, from their perspective, and from the perspective of others, by exploring respect in the context of a cultural paradigm. It was anticipated that by doing this, it would allow the students to reflect, and identify the origins of their perception of those of difference. This would help to ascertain whether these perceptions were governed by, for example, stereotypes born from experience, or from what they learnt from others. In order to achieve this aim, the author introduced a cultural diversity introductory model to the students, developed to further explore the notion of respect. This was shortly after the students had formed their consulting teams. (Wilson, Flynn, and Frame, P. 2008, referred to on pg 104) This model is presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 Cultural Diversity Team Introduction Exercise

Cultural Diversity Team Introduction Exercise	
1	<i>Each team member introduces themselves to the class confirming their name and cultural origin.</i>
Then	
2	<i>Identify two positive and then one negative cultural stereotype associated with your race, culture or ethnicity that you are comfortable to share with the rest of the class.</i>
Finally	
3	<i>Confirm the reality by stating the ‘facts’ which you believe to be a more appropriate and accurate representation of your cultural or racial/ethnic background.</i>

Model developed by D. Wilson 2001

As shown in Figure 2 above, each consultancy team was asked to do a class presentation, where individuals in the team were asked to use the above diversity, team exercise, to introduce themselves and their cultural origin. The students then identified two positive, and then one negative stereotype associated with their culture, before stating what they knew was the reality. The students were at liberty to introduce themselves how they felt fit, free of restriction, constraints, or influence. This resulted in a relaxed, enthusiastic and participative ambience.

The author observed and listened to the responses from the class audience to each of the student team presentations, which were a revelation. That is, there were numerous gasps, and looks of surprise, followed by fervent discussions as a result of these presentations. An example of this relates to the presentation given by one consulting team that comprised of three women; two black and the other white; in addition to two male Asian looking students. One of the black female students’ began the presentation by stating her name, before confirming that she was British of Jamaican parentage. She continued by explaining that although she was of Jamaican origin, she did not wear lots of ‘bling, bling’, a colloquial term meaning jewellery, which she said was a typical stereotype associated with Jamaicans; nor did she smoke marijuana, another typical associated stereotype. The audience laughed in response while nodding emphatically in agreement. Their response suggested that these stereotypes reflected their perception of Jamaicans. The other black female student introduced herself by saying that she was “a Jamaican born in Britain”. Although she was of the same ethnic origin as her colleague, she decided to identify herself in a dissimilar way. This student continued by informing the audience that Jamaica was the third largest island in the Caribbean with more churches per square mile, than any other country in the world. The audience’s reaction was to whisper among themselves, some of whom were overheard saying that they did not know Jamaicans were religious. This student concluded her presentation by stating that respect was important to her and her family, and that she was raised to be respectful.

The two Asian looking male students in the team doing their presentation, confirmed that they were from Persia, which they said, was “otherwise known as Iran to westerners”. There were a few raised eyebrows and sideward glances from numerous members in the audience in response to this revelation. These students continued by saying Persia was known for its rugs, adding that contrary to popular belief, the rugs had no magical powers. This made the audience laugh thus suggesting acknowledgment of this stereotype based on folklore. The final member in this team to present was the white female student, who said “as you can see, unlike my other two female team colleagues, I am white, but like my parents, and their parents before them, I was born and raised in Jamaica, so I am a Jamaican”.

There were gasps of surprise from the audience, followed by furtive discussions. One member in the crowd exclaimed, “how could she be Jamaican she’s white!” This was despite the fact that this student had a very heavy Jamaican accent, which some of the students observing later said they thought was an American accent. These responses suggested that the students’ assumptions and perception of those of difference differed from the reality.

This diversity exercise (introduced in 2006) was initially meant to run as a pilot, with six volunteer consulting teams from a class of approximately 120 students. However, the remaining teams of students insisted on being given the same opportunity to present their culture, hence the decision to run this exercise over three weeks instead of one. The diversity model is now an ongoing popular feature of the consultancy module, and since its introduction, conflict among teams reduced by 50% by the next intake.

Feedback after the diversity introduction exercise, coupled with what the majority of students wrote in their individual learning review essays, which required them to reflect on their attitudes, skills, knowledge and emotions as a means for reviewing their module related learning experiences; it became apparent that this exercise helped to promote the students knowledge, which provided greater understanding of those of cultural difference. This renewed awareness had a profound impact on the students learning, which in turn encouraged them to review their perception, and attitude towards those of difference, thus changing their behaviour that tended to be more negative than positive. For example, one student wrote:

“The cultural diversity team introduction exercise was regarded as `the icing on the cake` as it made us understand each other’s ethnic backgrounds and expectations better, so we were able to behave more respectfully towards each other” (second generation, female Pakistani student).

Another student reported that, *“My tutor helped us to understand each other, by getting us to introduce our culture and background, how we understand it to be and not how others think we are. I thought my tutor must respect us to allow us to do this presentation how we want”* (First generation male Chinese overseas student).

Commenting on the diversity exercise, a third student who was a second generation Afro-Caribbean male student, wrote; *“when I was given the opportunity to introduce myself and my culture, I thought at last, someone’s prepared to recognise me for who I am”*. Hofstede, (2001) asserts that “culture is not the same as identity” as “identities consist of peoples’ answers to the question: Where do I belong? The students narratives suggest that cultural identity although dissimilar, is synonymous with personal identity, therefore, if one is challenged, so is the other. With this in mind, it would be advised to note, that in order to respect an individual it is important to respect their culture or vice versa. Haydon (2006) supports this assumption by stating that “respect for persons has to take a person’s cultural context into account”.

Phase 1 (2007-2008) visual video recorded focus group findings

The eight video recorded focus group sessions with the students, and author (as researcher and tutor), was used as a discourse for discussing issues that relate to respect, and disrespect the students topics of choice. It was anticipated that this method would enable the author as research, to observe their interactive behaviour with the students, in addition to observing the interactive behaviour between the students themselves. This was in addition to listening to the stories generated from conversations in these sessions that would allow for greater understanding of the issue of respect and its implications in the classroom learning relationships.

Evmorfopoulou, (2000) lends credence to the validity of this method by stating that “focus groups are fundamentally a way of listening to people and learning from them”.

In May 2008, the students and author viewed the eight visual video recorded sessions for the first time (it was agreed that this viewing should take place at the end of the research). It soon became evident to the author from observations made, and from listening to the students’ in conversations on camera that this process yielded rich research data that related to three emerging themes; Namely, Perception, Attitude, and Feelings as Emotions. These findings were also indicative of the students understanding and meaning of respect from a culturally diverse perspective.

By watching the focus group videos, we (the students and I) observed our interactive behaviour, and listened to our various stories. Two stories for each of the three emerging themes are re-told below:

When discussing **perception** of those of difference, a male international Ugandan student in response to a Chinese group said about people being surprised when they realise he had no martial arts skills; commented:

“I always thought the reason why you never hear Chinese people getting attacked in the streets, is because everyone thinks they’re all good at Kung Fu, so you gotta give them respect for that.” This comment led to a chain reaction of responses from the other non Chinese members of the group, who said things like “yes come to think of it, that’s true, I never hear of Chinese people getting attacked”. Everyone including the two Chinese students laughed in response to these comments. However, before reacting in this way, the non Chinese participants glanced tentatively at the two Chinese students in the group, as though assessing their reaction before following suit and laughing. The impression was that they did not want to cause any offence.

Another British born male student of Nigerian origin, complained; *“I was on the train one day when a group of guys about my age, early twenties, asked me if I’d heard the latest tune by a US rap artiste! I don’t like rap, and only listen to classical music, like a lot of other Nigerians.* This participant added that, *“they took one look at me and assumed because I was a young black man dressed casually in trainers and wearing a `hoodie` that I would like gangsta rap.”* He talked at length at the end of this session about feeling offended by the way he was perceived by this group of young men and others who labelled him in a way that contradicts with the way he knew himself to be. It was evident from the way he responded to the memory of this experience (furrowed brow, raised voice, pursed mouth) that it had a significant impact on him.

Stories based on their **Attitude** included one told by an international female Chinese student who reported while sitting with head held high, that, *“I like to be polite so*

listen to others all the time, but sometime they show me no respect when they don't want to listen to me." Observations of this student showed that her voice level went up an octave, and her body language became more upright when she was telling her story, particularly when emphasising the need for respect. This gave the impression that respect was important to her.

A male participant from Moroccan, reported that, *"sometime when I'm out on the streets walking, I notice how some people cross the road when they see me coming, or hold on to their handbags as though I'm gonna mug them or something. They take one look at me and get the wrong impression."* This participant told his story in a very animated way, with wide-eyed looks and outstretched arms replicating the surprise that he felt at the time.

Feelings as emotions: A male Ugandan participant told his story of the time, *"when I saw myself on the video in discussion, I could not believe the way I was behaving. I was talking over others and was very loud which was embarrassing. I did not realise I behaved that way now I can see why people might think I'm being disrespectful but that's not what I'm thinking at the time."* This student later reported that, seeing himself in action on video had an immediate impact on his behaviour. He said he now accepts, as reported by friends and family, that he tends to talk more than he listens. He also admitted that seeing his behaviour with his own eyes, was the only thing that could have made the difference. This change in behaviour and attitude was later confirmed by his sister who said she noticed the difference straightaway.

Another one of the participants' stories regarding feelings as an emotion was told by a white British female student who said, "I felt anxious when I first started this module and discovered that I had to work in a team with people from so many different backgrounds. I now realise how much we have in common, and that they are different to what I thought they were so I am much more at ease with them". The change in her behaviour was quite noticeable throughout these focus group sessions. She hardly spoke at the beginning and instead would watch, and listen nervously (hunched shoulders, avoiding eye contact, crossed arms). However, she became more communicative and confident, the more attentive and culturally aware

she became. "It is in virtue of this aspect of careful attention that respect is sometimes thought of as an epistemic virtue" (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2007).

It was evident from observing the students' interactive behaviour, and from listening to their stories of respect and disrespect, that these stories invoked feelings of both enthusiasm and passion, thus suggesting an emotive aspect to respect. An example of this was observed at the end of one particular focus group session. The students stood up to leave, but instead continued with their conversation while standing in close proximity to each other. They continued to share their stories as they did in the focus group session, while slowly moving to the centre of the classroom before coming to a halt. They seemed oblivious of their surroundings, as they debated, discussed, and evaluated each others stories. They spoke in raised voices, and their body language became more expressive. Some participants gave advice on how a particular situation might have been perceived or dealt with differently. This was with regards to stories those who were often of a similar ethnicity or background to those giving the advice.

Another revelation that came to light from these video recorded focus group sessions, were the living contradictions observed with regards to what participants said, in contrast to what they did. The author as researcher, observed this from her own behaviour where, for instance, she reminded the student participants' that like them, she was an equal collaborator in the focus group research process, and would therefore not be taking the lead. However, from watching herself in action on film, it became evident that this was exactly what she did, which contradicted with what she said she was going to do. Jean McNiff, (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002) also said she "experiences herself as a living contradiction" as she says one thing and does something completely different. The example she gives relates to her belief in social democracy, which she acknowledges does not mean that she always allows people sufficient opportunity to state their views. These findings were both purposeful and beneficial as they provide invaluable insights to the meaning and understanding of respect from a culturally diverse perspective, as being crucial for addressing conflict and for nurturing team working relationships in the classroom learning relationship.

Conclusion

The relevance and effects of respect have been examined in some detail in this paper. Additionally, the author recognises that the three themes of Perception, Attitude and, Feelings as emotions, that emerged from this study, are reflective of acceptance and tolerance in the context of respect; In that perception from the perspective of culture, can be a determinant factor for acceptance of those of difference. However, according to Quaquebeke et al (2007) “we cannot speak of acceptance when questioning the object’s group membership has never occurred to one”. For example, “being in a soccer team for years, one would usually not state that one accepts some of the other players as being part of the team. On the other hand, as soon as somebody new ‘applies’ for membership and wants to play with the team, it seems more plausible to state acceptance (ibid).

Tolerance or intolerance on the other hand, could be seen as attitudinal, in that it suggests a cognitive mindset towards those of difference. Quaquebeke et al (2007) warned that “people do not tolerate their neighbours simply because they live next door to them. They have to be ‘visible’, have to provoke people’s perception to a certain degree (a deviance from the norm) before one could state “I am tolerating them”. “Labels such as respect, acceptance and tolerance have a great appeal to the outside world – to the world of politicians and advisors in various settings” (ibid) thus giving credence to their relevance in society today. As scientists provide the basis by which a lot of people talk, they should be particularly cautious concerning the adequateness of the labels they choose for their phenomena; Even more so, not only for the outside world,” (ibid) but also for diverse learners in the classroom

And finally, we should be reminded that “in everyday discourse, the valuing sense of respect, especially when used about people, most commonly means thinking highly of someone”, and that “in modern philosophical discussions, humans are universally regarded as the paradigm objects of moral respect” and that “if anything has moral standing or dignity and so warrants respect, it is the individual human being.

Although some theorists argue that nature or societies, or cultures also warrant the

moral consideration and valuing of respect” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2007). In essence these discussions coupled with the findings of this study, acknowledge that there is a relationship between respect and culture. However, if as speculated, respect for culture is also a gateway for respect for self, then the quote by the late Mahatma Gandhi would ring true; *“They cannot take away our self-respect if we do not give it to them”* (about.com, 2009). We could also ask, as a value `what is the true price of respect`?

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