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Adventures in diversity training

Lizette Nolte & Pieter W Nel

Abstract

In this paper we will discuss some maps that we find helpful to orientate and guide us when we venture to teach and learn about 'diversity.' The journey of diversity learning has no definite beginning or end points and always involves travelling together both as 'trainers' and as 'learners.'

Introduction

The Doctorate of Clinical Psychology Course at the University of Hertfordshire is committed to providing teaching that enables trainees to develop competence and confidence around engaging with diversity within their clinical practice. We have been involved in organizing and delivering teaching on different aspects of diversity on the course for the past 10 years. In this paper we will describe some of the maps we have developed for this training. Furthermore, we will reflect on our experiences of engaging in this training and some of the challenges that we encounter.

Diversity competence

The word 'diversity' can have different meanings for different people and can be invoked to accomplish different things in different conversations. We will use the term 'diversity' here to help orientate us to issues of *sameness and difference* that are related to what Burnham (1993) called 'Social GRRACCEESS': Gender; Religion; 'Race'; Age; Ability; Culture; Class; Education; Employment; Sexuality; and Spirituality. We see these issues as interacting systems, rather than as separate 'topics'.

In our view there are three interacting components to diversity competence: self-reflection/reflexivity, knowledge and skills. Self-reflection and reflexivity refer to a capacity for recognising the impact of our personal experiences, values and beliefs on how we interact with people who are similar to us, and people who are different from us, how we bring these into the interaction and the impact these have on the interaction. Knowledge, in our view, is important on different levels. We believe that cultural literacy is important and that we therefore need to be open to learn about those different to ourselves (and in more than just a cognitive way) (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995). We also believe that stereotypical knowledge is a danger and that cultural naiveté (Singh and Dutta, 2010) is an essential skill that allows us to develop a stance of active curiosity (Andolfi, 1997). For us, an essential part of developing diversity competence is to learn to recognise oppression and discrimination and develop an understanding of power and powerlessness (Patel et al., 2000).

The third component comprises those skills that enable us to initiate and participate in conversations about diversity with those who consult with us with an appropriate degree of confidence. These skills also help us to explore and expand stories that subjugate the 'other', (Gunaratnam, 2007) to ask questions which situate people and their difficulties in wider culturally complex systems and to intervene in ways that are appropriately sensitive to issues of diversity (e.g. working with interpreters).

Maps for training

Over the years of our engagement with this training, we have developed some maps that we find helpful to orientate us when teaching and learning about diversity. Firstly, establishing clear and coherent ground rules for the training journey has proved to be essential. By framing these aspects of setting the context as complementary positions, we emphasize mutual responsibility and 'give-and-take.' For example, one would like trainees to be open, but to achieve such openness they need to feel safe. One would want trainees to take responsibility for engaging with potentially sensitive topics, but to allow for this, there needs to be sufficient trust between members of the trainee group. We encourage a stance of curiosity, but for that to be acceptable, there needs to be mutual respect. We

believe that these complementary positions together create a context where learning about diversity can take place, and that it is the task of the trainer(s) to create such supportive structures or 'scaffolds' (White, 1997; Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976) to aid learning.

Secondly, in undertaking this journey we assume that there isn't an end point to arrive at, somewhere where you have achieved 'diversity competence.' This map helps us not to think of diversity learning as a linear – and by implication, a hierarchical – continuum of learning with a place to start and an idealized end point. Instead, diversity training, like other training, is a never ending journey (Nel, 1992), often turning back on itself or setting off in new directions. We therefore prefer a frame of co-travellers where we are all *both* 'trainers' and 'learners.'

Thirdly, we find it helpful to remind ourselves that people may enter this journey in different ways and at different places. Furthermore, different people may travel along this journey at different speeds, with different trajectories, and even in different directions – creating their own meanings along the way. This helps us move away from a 'right or wrong' frame. Rather, we value engagement with complexity and multi-dimensionality, instead of seeking definitive answers (Singh & Dutta, 2010). We each have our own unique journey to travel and our own unique map that guides us along the way.

Furthermore, we hold a view that this can potentially be an uncomfortable journey, what Reed (2010) refers to as 'pedagogies of discomfort' (p.433). We use Vygotsky's (1978) idea that good learning occurs in the trainee's 'zone of proximal development' (p.86) and therefore aim to create a learning position of safe uncertainty (Mason, 1993) which allows a degree of emotional risk taking (Mason, 2005).

Finally, we value local and personal knowledges and experiences, alongside more formal and expert knowledges (Nolte, 2007; White, 1997). This assumes that everyone already holds knowledges around diversity that would be valuable to bring into the training and that would allow for a more personal connection with the diversity learning journey.

Clients in Context Module

Informed by these maps for training, we have developed a *Clients in Context* module at UH to facilitate and pull together learning on different aspects of diversity. We adopt an infusion rather than inclusion approach (Winston & Piercy, 2010), thereby infusing the module with content that addresses GRRACCEESS and spending initial sessions to orientate trainees to diversity issues and adopting a self-reflective and reflexive stance within diversity learning and practice.

Following these initial sessions, interactive and experientially based workshops follow around specific themes including 'race' and culture, gender, sexuality, religion and spirituality, age, service user perspectives, working with interpreters, and community psychology. With the danger of these becoming distinct 'topics', we work towards making each session a building block furthering the three aspects of learning (self-reflectivity & reflexivity, knowledge and skills) and for learning to be transferable between different aspects of diversity.

New developments: A diversity adventure

Despite many developments in the delivery of this training over the years we were aware that some trainees found it difficult to engage with diversity training. They sometimes appeared uninterested, defensive, disengaged or too emotionally unsafe to fully step into the training. In recent times we have become convinced that the relationships we can have with diversity and diversity training need to be directly addressed at the start of training if we are to overcome these difficulties. We all come into diversity training situations with our own previous experiences of such trainings (e.g. trainees sometimes describe feeling blamed, feeling exposed, feeling it did not relate to them, feeling made to feel ignorant, etc.). These previous experiences are potential obstacles to learning. We have therefore become convinced of the importance of creating a space to reflect on our current relationships with diversity and on the positionings that are available to us (Reynolds, 2010) in our relationship with diversity training and learning.

Some of the positionings that in our view hinder learning and which we would want to address at the start of and throughout training include: an 'over there' position (reflecting on the difference of the

'other'); benevolent well-meaningness (imperialist/colonist desire for knowing and understanding the 'other'); political correctness (an idealizing, tentative position – 'the discrimination of the constraint in risk-taking' (Gunaratnam, 2007) – or a celebratory discourse of diversity); shame and guilt and feelings of defensiveness (withdrawing from learning); experiences of discrimination / marginalization (experiences of racism, classism, sexism, etc), and so on.

Training exercises

We agree with Winston and Piercy (2010) that both traditional (didactic) and non-traditional (experiential) methods should be used in diversity training. In this section, however, we will focus on three experiential exercises that we use at the outset of training in order to create a context for exploring the above obstacles to learning and experimenting with preferred positionings.

The 'norm' exercise

In this exercise we give the trainees the opportunity to explore a particular normative position (e.g. the norm for a clinical psychology trainee). We then ask them to consider how they relate to this normative position, and also how they believe they are perceived by others in relation to this normative position. We then ask them to consider what they strive for in relation to the normative position and the implications for them of these choices and perceptions. This is done in a physical and experiential manner. There is then a reflective exercise of relating this experience to other normative positions and the implications they have.

Cultural genograms

According to Hardy and Laszloffy (1995) trainees are "rarely challenged to examine how their respective cultural identities influence understanding and acceptance of those who are both culturally similar and dissimilar" (p.227). In order to help trainees explore (both cognitively and emotionally) their cultural identities trainees on our programme complete cultural genograms (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995) within the first couple of weeks of training. Trainees are asked to sketch out their family tree over at least three

generations (including grandparents). Next they are invited to identify their defining cultures of origin (major groups from which their family is descended). This is followed by a request to note the organising principles of each cultural group (constructs which shape perceptions, beliefs, and behaviours). Finally, they are asked to jot down issues invoking pride and / or shame for each cultural group. Each is then invited to introduce their genogram to another trainee who acts as a consulting partner. As an outline for the consultation, each trainee is asked to: say what it was like to create their cultural genograms, discuss the organising principles and pride/shame issues, consider how cultural beliefs were passed on from one generation to the next, explore what they have accepted and rejected from their own cultural heritage, and discuss how their cultural heritage might enable/handicap their clinical work.

Resource document

Informed by the assumption that all trainees have already done much learning on different aspects of diversity, and drawing on examples from systemic therapy (Context, 1999; Singh & Dutta, 2010), we co-construct a document of resources with each cohort. This allows for the recognition of the existing knowledge and experience of the trainee group (Nolte, 2007). It also acknowledges the principle that all diversity learning does not happen in lecture halls or through clinical psychology texts. The document is compiled by requesting trainees, in advance of the first teaching session on diversity, to answer the following questions: *Which novel or non-academic book has had the greatest influence on your thinking / values about diversity?; Which film has had the greatest influence on your thinking / values about diversity?; Which academic paper or book has had the greatest influence on your thinking / values about diversity?; and What is the most valuable lesson you have learnt about engaging with diversity?* All the responses are then compiled in a document and disseminated to the cohort. It is also framed as an evolving document to which people can continue to add throughout their training.

Where next?

We hope to continue to develop spaces and opportunities for trainees to explore alternative positionings in their relationships with diversity, to find new ways of facilitating observer and self-reflective positions, enriching the variety of alternative (positive) plot lines available and thickening preferred narratives (White, 1997). We also want to create spaces for consideration of invitations to responsibility and rituals of commitment (collective accountability). Narrative techniques including remembering conversations and definitional ceremonies (White, 1997) are potentially useful tools to draw on in this regard.

Many challenges remain for us. These include the wider course structures where there might remain a position of inclusion rather than infusion (Winston & Piercy, 2010) throughout the programme – this has the potential to remain a message of tokenism and have an ‘add-on’ feel. What Blackmore (2010) describes as ‘soft multiculturalism’ also needs to be considered where diversity is taught, but not reflected in the programme structure, e.g. the make-up of the staff group, trainee group, models taught, etc.

Conclusion

In this paper we shared some parts of our own journey as diversity teachers and paused by the side of the road to reflect on recent developments and learning. We are excited by where this adventure might take us next...

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