

# Teacher Education for Cultural Diversity: Online and at a Distance

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**INTRODUCTION** It is widely acknowledged internationally that student populations in English-speaking contexts are becoming more culturally and linguistically diverse, while teacher populations remain largely white, middle-class, and monolingual (Chisholm, 1994; Santoro & Allard, 2003; Terrill & Mark, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The situation in New Zealand is similar, with an increasingly diverse population being projected in terms of ethnicity. Statistics New Zealand (<http://www.stats.govt.nz>) projects that by 2021 the percentage of New Zealanders who identify with ethnicities other than European will be more than 30 percent. In the compulsory education sector, the number of students from migrant and refugee families has increased significantly in the past fifteen years, as has the number of international fee-paying students. However, Ministry of Education data indicate only slow growth in the level of ethnic diversity in pre-service teacher education students over the ten years from 1991 to 2001. Students who identify as European still make up around 75 percent of prospective teachers in the compulsory sector (Smith, 2004). The potential mismatch between the student population and the teacher population, in terms of identities and experiences, is cause for concern as it raises questions about the ability of teachers to effectively relate to

and meet the needs of students who are not like them (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Santoro & Allard, 2003).

Teacher education institutions are expected to prepare teachers for the diversity (cultural, linguistic, socio-economic, ability) they will encounter in modern classrooms. Faced with a student teacher population that largely represents the dominant cultural and socioeconomic group, and has limited exposure to cultural or linguistic diversity, how best to achieve the goal of preparation for diversity is a question that continues to challenge teacher education providers. In commenting on teacher expertise in working with children who have English as an additional language in New Zealand schools, Franken and McComish (2003, p.136) conclude, "There is a need for a great deal more teacher and school expertise in all aspects of promoting second language development, and bilingual development." This suggests that many beginning teachers may graduate with insufficient understandings about the particular needs of linguistically and culturally diverse children, and with limited skills to address those needs.

Recent initiatives in initial teacher education have seen some institutions providing qualifications by distance. The deregulation in the mid-1990s of tertiary

education generally, and of teacher education in particular, provided opportunities for tertiary institutions to broaden their student base. One market that was largely untapped in teacher education was students who were unable or unwilling to move to main centres to access teacher education programmes. In response there was a move by some teacher education providers to develop distance programmes to reach these students (see for example Delany & Wenmoth, 2003). Distance education has traditionally been print based, with study guides designed to emulate a conversation between tutor and student—a “tutorial in print” (Rowntree, 1999). The advent of the Internet and associated online technologies has changed the face of communication and distance education forever. Synchronous (online chat) and asynchronous (e-mail, online discussion forums) forms of communication offer unprecedented opportunities for distance students to share in the types of interactions previously only available in face-to-face encounters. As a result there has been significant growth in the number of distance courses utilising online technologies to enhance student learning (for example Campbell, McGee, & Yates, 2000).

At the Christchurch College of Education School of Primary Teacher Education, teaching for diversity and online technologies come together in a course called Language and Culture in the Classroom (ML232) in the Graduate Diploma of Teaching and Learning (GDipTchLn) programme. ML232 is a 20-hour, semester-long, compulsory course for students who enter primary teacher education with a degree. Since 2001 the course has been delivered online for distance students in an attempt

to utilise and integrate new technology, and skills in using this technology, into the course. In addition it provides an opportunity to bring distance students together in a discussion forum where they can co-construct their understandings, and share ideas and experiences related to the course content, with the guidance of a lecturer.

This paper discusses the extent to which effective teacher education for diversity can occur at a distance using online technologies. It explores the use of the online discussion forum to teach a multicultural education course in a distance, initial teacher education course. Data from an in-depth evaluative survey completed by students in the first year of online teaching (2001), subsequent feedback from students, their online discussions, my experience of teaching the course online for four years, and available literature inform the ideas presented. The paper begins with a brief outline of online technologies in distance education, followed by an introduction to the characteristics of teacher education for diversity. Finally, the two are drawn together in a discussion about the effect of online technologies on student interaction and learning in multicultural education courses generally and ML232 in particular.

**ONLINE TECHNOLOGIES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION** McLachlan-Smith (1998) suggests that dialogue between teacher and student is an essential element of distance education. In the past the challenge in distance education was to find ways to achieve dialogue within media that did not allow for any form of direct and timely interaction. The Internet has rendered this challenge largely irrelevant, adding a new communicative dimension to the

distance teaching and learning experience and enabling dialogue in unprecedented ways. A range of terms is used to refer to online communication in education, including: *e-learning*, *computer mediated communication (CMC)*, *online learning*, *asynchronous learning*, *Web-based instruction*, and *computer conferencing*. In this paper e-learning and online learning are used interchangeably to refer to asynchronous, discussion-based teaching and learning using Internet online technologies. Those who manage online discussions are referred to as e-moderators.

There can be no doubt about the potential advantages of online technologies for establishing learning communities and interactive opportunities not previously available to distance students. In fact the electronic medium of online discussion can even offer elements that face-to-face discussion cannot, with its potential for "sustained group discussion" which explores multiple themes simultaneously (Tolley, 2000). The successes that many educators experience with mixed media programmes challenge assumptions that face-to-face teaching and learning is better than alternative methods (Campbell, et al., 2000).

Asynchronous discussions have come to form the mainstay of many online education programmes, and the literature identifies a number of significant characteristics of online teaching and learning (for example Bonk, Wisner, & Lee, 2003; Salmon, 2000). One key characteristic relates to the change in pedagogy implied by and required for successful e-learning and e-teaching. Essentially online discussions can facilitate collaborative knowledge building, in line with constructivist pedagogy, although, as Nunan (1999,

p.71) points out, "There is nothing inherent in the media offered by [Web-based instruction] that takes it in this direction." While Nunan focused on the use of synchronous chat in his study, the point is also pertinent to asynchronous interaction. Despite Nunan's reservations, it is generally agreed that e-learning tools can provide access to materials and activities that fit a range of learning preferences and create opportunities for learners to construct knowledge and exercise greater control over their learning (Bonk, et al., 2003; Collis & Moonen, 2001; Tolley, 2000). It is often the case that the balance of control of online discussion shifts from teacher to students over the duration of the course, and the competent e-moderator will plan for this to occur. The other side to this change in pedagogy is the roles that are opened up for teachers to adopt. These have been identified as ranging from social and technical to organisational and pedagogical (Berge, 1995). A growing literature has sprung up offering advice and guidance to those who wish to teach via online discussions (see for example Bonk, et al., 2003; Ko & Rossen, 2004; Salmon, 2000).

Online learning has important equity implications. While it can exclude those who do not have access to the technology required for participation, it also has the capacity to provide greater access to discussion for a greater number of students (Chen & Hung, 2002). Asynchronous interaction offers significant potential for inclusion and participation across time and space. Participants can contribute in their own time and a better representation of views is possible (Chen & Hung, 2002). There is also evidence that participants from language backgrounds other than English

find it easier to have a voice in online discussion compared to face-to-face (Kamhi-Stein, 2000; Merryfield, 2001).

### TEACHER EDUCATION FOR DIVERSITY

A range of phrases is employed to refer to teacher education programmes that aim to develop attitudes and skills in teaching culturally and linguistically diverse populations, including: “preparing teachers for diverse student populations” (Ladson-Billings, 1999), “preparing teachers for multicultural classrooms” (Chisholm, 1994), “educating teachers for cultural and linguistic diversity” (Parla, 1994), and, more generically, *multicultural teacher education*. In this paper the phrase *teacher education for diversity* is used to refer to such programmes. In choosing this phrase, it is acknowledged that *diversity* itself is a contested term because of its focus on difference and differentiation. Using diversity as the basis for courses about multiculturalism is problematic because it does not question the taken-for-granted assumptions about the dominant culture as the neutral standpoint from which diversity is defined and discussed. In the context of this paper, *diverse* is used to refer to cultural and linguistic difference, while acknowledging that this may potentially reinforce notions of the majority culture as the norm from which diversity is categorised. Nevertheless, *diversity* is the most useful term in this context as it accurately describes the notion that there is a difference or gap between the identities and experiences of many (majority culture) teachers and those of the (minority culture) students they teach.

Recent research exploring effective teacher education for diversity suggests a

number of essential elements to develop student teachers’ attitudes towards, beliefs and knowledge about, and skills in addressing the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children (Jenks, Lee, & Kanpol, 2001; Terrill & Mark, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). A number of dimensions, characteristics, elements, or models that typify effective teacher education for diversity are offered in the literature. What follows is a discussion of the main themes to emerge.

A core characteristic of effective teacher education for diversity is the development of sociocultural consciousness (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This begins with an examination of one’s own sociocultural identities and the various groups to which one belongs. Exploring and understanding one’s own cultural, linguistic, and ethnic identities before examining others’ is considered a vital starting point for multicultural education programmes. Villegas & Lucas (2002) suggest an “autobiographical exploration, reflection, and critical self-analysis” (p.22), while Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2000) is convinced it is vital for teacher education to incorporate accounts about race and racism that “get personal.” She focuses strongly on using students’ experiences rather than multicultural content knowledge as a starting point for exploring issues of diversity (Cochran-Smith, 2000). An aim of some programmes is to destabilise students’ sense of themselves as the norm, as a means of drawing attention to inequitable structures and practices in education (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Zeichner, et al. (1998) suggest that self-knowledge should be followed by an examination of one’s own attitudes and beliefs about “others,” and how these might impact on teaching and learning.

It is considered important for prospective teachers to know about diverse children and their families, or at least to know how to learn about them—their backgrounds, experiences, and expectations (Chisholm, 1994; Parla, 1994; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). An important aspect of this is ensuring that students do not essentialise or stereotype children or ethnic groups, but understand the individual differences that exist within any group (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Zeichner, et al., 1998). Teachers must also know how to use this knowledge to plan, implement, and evaluate relevant instruction (Zeichner, et al., 1998). Constructivist pedagogy is promoted as highly appropriate for culturally responsive teaching, but is something that student teachers must experience in their own learning if it is to be understood and adopted into their teaching (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In addition, an understanding of intercultural communication strategies will increase cultural competency (Chisholm, 1994), as will learning about different forms of classroom interaction and organisational structures and how they impact on learning (Bishop, 2003). One way of developing this knowledge is via field experiences, where student teachers engage with children or adults from diverse backgrounds. These are frequently identified as a vital component of teacher education for diversity (Parla, 1994; Terrill & Mark, 2000; Zeichner, et al., 1998). It is widely agreed, “Teachers need face-to-face experiential learning with people different from themselves if they are to develop cross-cultural skills, knowledge, and competence” (Merryfield, 2003, p.1). The power of field experiences to challenge and change student teachers’ perceptions and understandings is described in a number of studies (see Cabello &

Burstein, 1995; Deering & Stauntz, 1995; Wiest, 1998; Wiggins & Follo, 1999). Increasingly the Internet is being seen as a tool for intercultural projects aimed at building cultural sensitivity and awareness where direct contact with culturally and linguistically diverse groups is not possible.

Student teachers must understand teaching as contextualised in a particular cultural and sociopolitical milieu based on relations of power and privilege. It is not therefore a neutral activity, but intellectual and political, requiring critical thinking and a commitment to change in order to challenge inequities (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Zeichner, et al. (1998) suggest that power sharing must be modelled by teacher educators to foster collaborative, cooperative, and partnership-based teaching and learning.

**ONLINE TEACHER EDUCATION FOR DIVERSITY** ML232, Language and Culture in the Classroom, uses online discussion as a central means of engaging students with course content. The course is constructed around six topics and the students are provided with a comprehensive set of readings and guide questions for each topic. The themes and key ideas are developed using threaded discussion forums on the college’s Web-based platform. The students are grouped into clusters of 12 to 15, and each group has its own discussion area within the course site. Access to each group area is restricted by password to members of that group only. Students are expected to read the course material and respond to key questions posed in a starting thread by the lecturer. Required participation is built into the course assessment and students must post one original comment about each

topic and one response to someone else's post. At the end of the course students write a reflective essay describing their new learning and understandings and the implications of these for their own teaching.

An early task in ML232 requires students to write a description of their own culture and the forces that have shaped it. This is posted as a home page on the course site. The task stimulates the students' reflective processes in considering their own identities, while also exposing them to a range of others' views and experiences. This opportunity to understand where others come from, and are coming from, performs an important function in breaking the ice and starting the process of developing a cohesive community of learners for the duration of the course. It is a recommended first step in managing an online course (Ko & Rossen, 2004; Salmon, 2000). Students report a high level of enjoyment of this task and appreciate the insights they gain into their own and others' cultures, values, and beliefs. One of the interesting aspects this task reveals is the fact that there is often quite a high level of diversity within this particular student cohort. While the student teacher population generally is predominantly monocultural and monolingual, those enrolled in the graduate diploma programme tend to be more diverse. Distance students are on average older than on-campus students, and most have rich life experiences which they readily share with the group. Their home page stories reveal that many have travelled extensively and often have lived in other countries. They experience diversity within their families through partners and other relatives. Often groups have one or two people who are bilingual, and who may have grown up

in other parts of the world. The stories the students share online are eagerly received by others, and they provide access to diversity (Schoorman, 2002) and an opportunity to hear multiple voices and perspectives (Kamhi-Stein, 2000; Merryfield, 2001) which would not otherwise be available.

For example:

Usually it does not take a very long time to pick up phrases or being able to have simple conversations, but to be able to express your feelings, have a political discussion or just being quick enough, that the joke is not always on you, seems to take forever. Cummins (2000) estimation is between 5 to 7 years. . . . Reflecting back on my experience, I found it very hard, that I never could present my true self, express my passion about things, saying the right thing at the right time, being deeply involved in a "heavy" conversation and just having the feeling that a lot of people underestimate you, because of your limited ability to express yourself. (Student post, 2004)

For most of us that migrate to New Zealand with no English background, we have that keenness to learn, and wanting to be a part of that society, at the same time, afraid to take that risk in case we mispronounce a word, afraid of being laughed at and being teased by others. (Student post, 2004)

My own use of language may cause some difficulties for NESB children because I am not a kiwi and I will probably bring some [----] aspects to my way of doing and expressing

issues in the classroom. One example of this would be that I cannot understand all the jokes made by kiwis and they do not at all times understand my jokes because they are related to my culture. At the same time I believe I have an advantage of being unambiguous about my expectations because I have the need to be clear about what I expect in the classroom environment. (Student post, 2004)

A fundamental aim in teacher education for diversity is developing cultural understandings and positive attitudes towards diversity. This is difficult to achieve via print-based materials alone. The discussion forums for distance students are an opportunity for interaction that enhances the development of these elements. Student comments evaluating ML232 support the notion that online interaction enhances their learning experience: "The discussion helped me a lot to learn and think about others' ideas;" "The interaction made it personal;" "The diversity of opinions/ideas that were generated by the readings were a great source of inspiration and helped stimulate discussion." While they may not be a substitute for face-to-face interactions and experiences, "Online technologies are important tools for teacher educators who value cross-cultural experiences, skills, and knowledge in local, national and global contexts" (Merryfield, 2003, p. 2).

Online interaction is qualitatively different to face-to-face communication. In a face-to-face classroom, students have immediate access to the discussion and use a range of nonverbal cues both to provide and to gain meaning. This is not the case with online discussion. In

my experience, some students struggle with the different style of interaction required in this context. Some worry about misinterpretations due to the lack of paralinguistic cues (facial expression, tone of voice, and so on) in online communication. On the other hand, there may be advantages as, instead of responding to the physical presence of others, students "pay more attention to the content of the message" (Lai, 1996, cited in Merryfield, 2001, p. 295) without being distracted by the addition of extraneous visual information. The type of language used online also differs from that of face-to-face discussions. It falls somewhere between speaking and writing and has been referred as "written speech" (Coghlan, 2001). It is less formal than writing, but more formal than speaking. In ML232 online discussions, students tend to mix more formal discussions of course readings with informal storytelling from their own experiences. As the e-moderator, I model my expectations adopting a conversational tone and retaining a high level of accuracy.

The online environment offers opportunities to experience participation and interaction patterns that challenge traditional styles of teaching at tertiary level. Kamhi-Stein (2000), for example, found that the traditional "initiation-response-evaluation" (IRE) participation pattern common in face-to-face interactions between teachers and students was significantly less apparent in her Web-based Masters' level TESOL teacher education course. E-learning appears to encourage students to take greater responsibility for initiating and managing dialogues for various purposes (to relate experiences, make connections, reflect on content [Kamhi-Stein, 2000]), and to take on different roles and voices within

discussions (student, teacher, peer, specialist, informant [Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999]). This suggests that online discussions have the capability to promote a more egalitarian learning community where students can learn from each other as much as from the teacher. The lack of hierarchy common in the multidirectional communication (Schoorman, 2002) of online forums can be disconcerting to teachers who wish to keep control of the discussion. In my experience a "light touch" (as one of my students described it) is important. Student feedback indicates a preference for allowing discussions not dominated by too much lecturer interference with more informed opinions. On the other hand, students value supportive, encouraging, and pertinent comments that promote thinking and discussion, and they appreciate guidance via questions.

In addition to the different interactive patterns in an online environment, there is evidence that the nature of the discussion is also different. Merryfield (2001, 2003) reports online discussions that were perceived as more reflective, open, frank, and less inhibited than in face-to-face contexts. Multicultural education encompasses a number of sensitive and controversial issues, such as racism and bilingual education, which some students find challenging to discuss face-to-face. The asynchronous and distant nature of online communication encourages some students to say things they would not otherwise, because they cannot see the reactions of others (Kamhi-Stein, 2000; Merryfield, 2003). In addition, students have time to reflect because there is no pressure to perform on cue (Kamhi-Stein, 2000). Student feedback indicates that not being put on the spot or having to voice opinions in front of a group is an

advantage of e-learning. Furthermore, students can revisit discussion threads because they have a permanence that spoken language does not. This, coupled with the public nature of the discussion, may encourage all participants (including course leaders) to take more care in the way points are made and cases are argued. The time lag inherent in asynchronous discussion also benefits participants for whom English is an additional language, who may struggle to keep up with spoken discourse.

Merryfield (2003) further suggests that online discussion encourages participants to think more deeply about course content, and reports seeing "more complex thinking about course content in threaded discussions than I believe is ever possible in an oral whole class discussion in a conventional classroom" (p. 9). Learning is facilitated by having time to consult references, reflect, compose, edit contributions, and interact over several days or weeks. The reading material for ML232 provides a knowledge base on which the online discussion centres. In my experience distance students engage with course materials to a greater extent than on-campus students, and their online discussions reflect this. They use their personal experiences and stories to help make links between theory and practice, and demonstrate sound understandings of course content. For example:

It is interesting to read that you were contemplating learning Te Reo Maori when you first came to New Zealand, and how people reacted to this. I too have heard many people make similar comments, especially "don't bother, it's only spoken in NZ", and "why". Some people make these comments without

really understanding the value of learning another language and the cultural aspects that go with it. I believe it is their loss and our gain when we do finally understand and take on board a new language (even a small amount of a new language). The opposite can also occur, that is, people assume you know a language because you have the right skin colour, lived there, or family connections. Throughout my senior college years and while studying Maori at University (which I withdrew from after 6 months), many people (including teachers and lecturers) presumed I could speak Maori due to my ethnic background and skin colouring. Some people were plain rude about it. I now wish that I had continued my study in this area but at the time could not handle the stress and lack of my cultural identity. This experience will also stay with me, and now I feel empathy with others who also struggle with a loss of their culture and language. Hopefully this will transfer into my future classroom if and when I have any NESB learners. (Student post)

Relating stories from their own experiences that illustrate a key concept or principle personalises course content and also creates a more powerful connection for other students. Online discussion forums are one of the few ways that distance students can gain a sense of connection with others, through collaboration and co-construction of understandings (Nunan, 1999).

A further example of the way in which online discussion gives access to a wide range of experiences is in the stories that students share from their

practicum placements. In ML232 direct experiences with children and families from diverse backgrounds are not a planned element of the programme. However, many students experience diversity on their two five-week practicum placements. A practicum falls in the middle of the ML232 course and subsequent online discussions reflect the students' experiences. For example:

On practice I had 3 NESB [non-English speaking background] boys. It can sometimes be very hard to tell whether they do not understand the *concept/information* or whether they misunderstand my *instructions* on how to do the task. (Student post, 2004)

I had the opportunity to put some of these ideas into practice on my last PP. Bearing in mind what we'd been learning on this course I taught a unit I designed myself on Kiwi culture to a year 8 class in which there was a high proportion of ESOL students. . . . It was great fun, and I would definitely do it again on in the year, because some of these children really had their eyes opened about each other. (Student post, 2004)

Other students are able to learn, albeit vicariously, from the challenges and successes experienced on practicum by their classmates. Students make connections between ideas in the course readings and their own teaching experiences. Once again the online discussion facilitates this in a way that otherwise would not be possible.

Despite the positive aspects of online technologies, there are some criticisms.

Some students find asynchronous, online discussions can be disjointed and lack spontaneity. The gap between posting an idea and getting a response can be frustrating and disheartening. For some, online interaction is perceived as being “a much less meaningful way to interact across cultures . . . than face to face interaction” (Merryfield, 2001, p. 295). On the other hand, others find intercultural communication easier in writing than face-to-face (Schoorman, 2002). Despite online technologies promoting frank and open discussion, they are also perceived as a barrier to really getting to know others, and online relationships are perceived as incomplete without a face-to-face meeting (Merryfield, 2001). The graduate students enrolled in ML232 do meet together at residential schools twice a year, and so have the advantage of putting a face and personality to the name in the online discussion. This seems to enhance the development of community, enabling discussion to focus quickly on course content rather than needing to spend time on social elements.

There are two further difficulties with online discussions that are worth mentioning. The one that draws the most comment (in course evaluations and the literature) is the time-consuming nature of online interaction. It takes considerably more time to read discussion threads and construct responses than to interact in a one-hour class discussion. The literacy requirements of online courses make them heavily weighted towards students who are confident and competent in written English and in using online technologies. To take full advantage of the flexibility and convenience identified as a key positive element of e-learning, courses must be carefully constructed with realistic requirements and expectations, and students must be well

organised to keep up with the discussion. For course instructors, too, time can be an issue. The second difficulty is with the technology itself. The fast pace of development in online technologies makes it difficult to keep up with in terms of the computer specifications and type of Internet connection required in order to work effectively online. Technical glitches are a major source of frustration for many participants in online courses, which is why the online activity in ML232 has been restricted to simple threaded discussions. These do not take up too much space and load relatively quickly. They are straightforward to use, and posts can be written offline in a Word document for later cutting and pasting. Effective e-moderation entails supporting students through difficulties and passing on tips and suggestions for managing the process of online communication.

**CONCLUSION** In this paper I have suggested that an initial teacher education course in teaching for diversity, which incorporates online discussion forums, can effectively create a community of learners and enhance the learning experience for distance students. The unique opportunities provided by e-learning to interact, critique ideas, reflect, share stories, explore strategies, and build relationships cannot be underestimated in preparing students for teaching in diverse contexts. Online discussion stimulates interaction that is student-centred and qualitatively different to face-to-face contexts. Students are able to engage with course content at a deep level and to make connections between theory and practice in the stories they tell in response to course readings and topics. While face-to-face collaborative work and practical experiences with diverse people may also

be necessary “if teachers are to develop intercultural competence in working with others” (Merryfield, 2003, p. 14), the incorporation of online discussion into multicultural education courses significantly improves the likelihood of distance students acquiring knowledge, skills, and attitudes to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children in New Zealand schools.

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