Dr Kim McLeod – UTAS – 15th June 2021

The importance of tending to relationships

Purpose and context of the presentation

The presentation focuses on the importance of tending to relationships in online cultural safety education. It discusses research comparing cultural safety education in shared physical spaces and online workshops, including how the online classroom mediates dimensions of cultural safety education for students and teachers, and how to further best practice in online cultural safety education.

Relational pedagogies underpin the cultural safety program. Relational pedagogies are those where learning and knowledge results from the relationships and interactions between teachers and students. The 'in between' space is viewed as the space where education occurs.

During COVID, on-campus workshop activities were directly translated to online mode, including students responding online to case studies, students engaging in small group discussion and students brainstorming together.

Results of research comparing on-campus and online learning

A comparison of how the online environment and the shared physical space mediate students engagement revealed the following:

- The online environment affects student attendance and engagement with teaching and learning. Web conferencing tools, bandwidth and connectivity impact attendance.
- The student learning environment is changed. Students' homes are often busy or noisy and students often keep their cameras off.
- Economic inequalities affect how students engage in online learning. Many students connected to teaching via their mobile phones.
- There is reduced informal conversation between students-students and students-teacher. Social connections and peer learning opportunities were missing.
- The online environment shapes how students communicate. Students overwhelmingly used the written chat, which may have been a preferred medium for some, and allowed for questions across the participants, but which tended to promote short exchanges or agreements instead of further reflections, critical thinking or expanded responses. It also limited how students could learn through relationships.
- The online environment mediates participants' bodily presence. Student avoidance of cameras meant a loss of body language and non-verbal cues, identified as important in the teaching process. Tutors could not develop the relationships vital for students to see the learning environment as a safe space to share their values and experiences.

Course-specific (cultural safety) issues

The on-campus workshop activities were designed around finding ways to encourage students to think about their values, beliefs, and experiences, and reflect on prejudices with the aim of preventing unsafe healthcare experiences for patients in their future workplaces. **But it was not possible to develop the relationships and relatedness to support this co-learning in the online space**.

This limited the possibilities for tutors to facilitate critical discussion. Sometimes students gave generalised or stereotypical answers to prompts, other times students gave empathetic and thoughtful observations. A lack of critical discussions prevented:

- Requisite ontological disturbance to facilitate transformative learning.
- Difficult conversations to support critical thinking.

Cultural safety teaching and learning provisions are characterised by emotional labour involved in both facilitating (for tutors) and participating in (for students) in difficult conversations. The online environment intensifies teachers' emotional labour because students were unable or unwilling to engage with the video and audio aspects of web conferencing.

As a result:

- Tutors engaged in additional emotional labour to generate discussion.
- There was a lack of student reciprocity.
- Tutors felt exhausted and drained. Tutors felt teaching online was a one-way street.
- Tutors felt like their role had shifted from facilitating transformative learning to delivering content.
- Tutors attempted to become more performative to elicit student engagement, but this added to the emotional labour.
- Lowered student engagement left tutors feeling disheartened and ineffective.

A pedagogy-first approach

- Importance of putting pedagogy before technological infrastructures.
- Expanding on pedagogies that enable relational and critical learning.
- Actively explore the online spaces which help students to connect and build relationships and use as a base for developing teaching and learning activities.
- Develop intended learning outcomes that assess students' insights about their own learning, and about collaboration and relational capacities.
- Teacher training on understanding the technological infrastructures and to support relational learning.

Future considerations

- Whether to make online content more interactive using templates such as TikTok.
- Importance of co-designing teaching/learning with students and student feedback.
- Enabling collaboration between students by experimenting and using new approaches.
- How to protect teachers' emotional labour through managing expectations and providing resources and training.
- Encourage reflective practice, provide detailed teaching guides with ILOs, provide all materials and let staff debrief.
- Remove passive learning such as lecture-based activities and challenge students with interactive teaching and learning activities online.