Preparing Teachers to Face the Challenge of Diversity and Educational Technology in Canadian Schools

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After 15 months of consultations on the future of education in Alberta, Alberta’s Commission on Learning recently released its report - Every child learns. Every child succeeds. It identified some of the challenges and new development opportunities in Alberta’s education, including its large class size, increasing diverse student population and rapid technological change; and the need to provide support for Aboriginal children, children with diverse languages and cultures, and children with special needs. The report made 95 recommendations to be taken in eight key areas. This article highlights an innovative course in the teacher education program at the University of Alberta, which prepares prospective teachers to face two of the challenges stated above: issues of diversity in education and the use of educational technology.

Living in An Ethnoculturally Diverse Society

The 2001 Census of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2003) reveals that Canada’s population is becoming increasingly ethnoculturally diverse. It reports that as of May 15, 2001, 18.4% of the total population were born outside the country, and that 13.4% identified themselves as visible minorities. While Europe was the traditional source of immigrants to Canada, a large proportion of the recent arrivals came from Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean, Central and South America, and Africa.

At the provincial level, Alberta is the fourth largest immigrant-receiving province. About 15% of its population were foreign-born in 2001 and 11% identified themselves as visible minorities. Most of Alberta’s immigrants came from China, the Philippines, India, Korea, and Pakistan. More than half of them came as skilled workers, and over 42% had a university degree. They were destined to two major cities in Alberta: Calgary (60%) and Edmonton (30%). In 2002, 26% of the total newcomers to Alberta were school-aged children and youth (Alberta’s Commission on Learning, 2003). Consequently this has contributed to a rich diversity of children in school and increasing challenges to help them learn English and adapt to their school and community. For teachers, this means that they “need better preparation on how to respond to the challenge of the growing diversity of children in their schools” (p.114).

The Challenge of Educational Technology

Another important aspect of changes in Canada is the use of educational technology. Without a doubt, technology is changing the way we live, learn, and teach. It is predicted that the explosion of new technologies and multimedia is going to continue. In the future, the definition of literacy requires a
person more than being able to read and write, but also basic technological, visual, and information literacy (Alberta’s Commission on Learning, 2003). The Report points out: (i) “Technology has to be integrated into all aspects of teaching and learning and used wisely and effectively to improve results for students” (p.13); (ii) Teachers “need better preparation in how to integrate technology as a tool in their classrooms” (p.115); and (iii) All teacher preparation programs in the Province should “model the appropriate application of technology” (p.110).

**WebCT as a Forum to Promote Equity and Diversity in Education**

In the preceding section I will reflect on my experiences of teaching a course called Education and Society (EDPS 360) at the Faculty of Education, University of Alberta. This was a 3-credit optional course for pre-service teachers. There were 39 students in the course, 21 female and 17 male. More than half of them were third year students while the rest were in their fourth year. The majority were in secondary education programs and their specializations covered most of the subjects offered in school. In terms of their ethnic background, they were primarily of Euro-Canadian ancestry, with the exception of three Asian Canadians.

The objective of the course was to help perspective teachers critically examine their assumptions, educational beliefs, and pedagogical practices in the context of a multicultural society. It addressed some of the issues identified by the Alberta’s Commission on Learning, but went far beyond it. Seven topics were included in the course: Aims of Education, Multiculturalism, Anti-Racism, Aboriginal Education, Poverty, Gender, and Sexual Orientation. The focus was on social justice and equity in education.

Reflecting on how the course went, I think three elements contributed to the success of the course. First, I designed a variety of activities to build a positive and inclusive classroom. For example, in my first class we did a Bingo Card game to break the ice and get to know each other. I also brought in scratch paper to do name tags because I wanted to learn students’ names and I also wanted to encourage them to learn each other’s names. As a group we also brainstormed guidelines for our class discussion, which I called Group Agreement.

Second, I used different instructional strategies and resources to make the course more interesting. I incorporated many andragogical principles of adult learning (Knowles, 1998) into the course. I saw myself as a facilitator rather than a “banker”, whose role was to “deposit” and “fill” (Freire, 2000). I regarded my students as equal individuals who brought in rich experience into the classroom. I also made it clear at the beginning that it was important to hear what they thought about social issues in education. So critical thinking was key here. Student’s participation was highly valued while active listening was also respected.

Third, I introduced WebCT as a forum to enhance debate over issues of equity and diversity in education. The decision to use WebCT was influenced by the following arguments. (i) WebCT has the capacity to increase class participation and communication (Guo, 2000). In particular, for the quiet and shy students, WebCT provides an opportunity to contribute to the discussion outside class. It also allows
more time for them to think and respond. (ii) Technology is not neutral. It is “an agent of power and control” (Franklin, 1999, p.3). WebCT was used here as a catalyst to empower students and bring about changes in perspectives. (iii) WebCT has the potential to create an environment of dialogue, interchange, and problem solving for critical thinking to develop (Bullen, 1997).

The format adopted was a “technology-enhanced face-to-face teaching” (Bates & Poole, 2003). I posted my course syllabus, assignments, course schedule, course notes, and announcements on the WebCT so that students could access them anytime and anywhere (see Figure 1). The most useful feature was its Discussions. Part of the course assignments was an online journal. The purpose of this assignment was to create a forum for reflection, collegial dialogue, and reflexive analysis. Throughout the course, students were asked to contribute a minimum of two postings each week to the WebCT discussion: a response to the Journal question; and a response to a message posted by a fellow student. At the beginning of the course, I booked a computer lab to provide WebCT training. Students got a chance to familiarize themselves with the platform before they started to post journal entries.

Figure 1: EDPS 360 Home Page

The online journal was successful in taking the debate beyond the classroom. For each journal question, about 100 entries were posted and people were usually very articulate with their argument. I noticed that a few students who were not very active in class were always the first ones to post. The questions posted were always related to the theme covered that week. It gave people another chance to think critically about issues discussed in class or use the readings to analyze issues manifested in school. Here are some examples of the online journal questions.

Week two and three focused on multiculturalism and multicultural education. The journal question for week two was:

There are two statements in Nieto’s (2002) article that appear interesting. One says: “We don’t need multicultural education here; most of our students are White.” The second states: “Multicultural education is divisive. We need to focus on our similarities and then everything will be fine.” What do you think of these statements? Do you agree or disagree? And why? Feel free to refer to the school settings with which you are familiar.

The question for week three was:

Based on the reading materials of this week and your experience as a learner and teacher, how well do you think our schools are nurturing cultural and linguistic diversity? Is there any space for improvement? If yes, what could we do to make it better? Do you have any specific strategies to suggest?

Week four was on anti-racist education. Here is the question for that week:

If you hear racist language in your classroom, in the school hallway, or on a playground, what would you do/say? Please elaborate on your suggestions.

Figure 2: Discussions Board

Comments from the formative course evaluation indicated that transformative learning did take place among students. Many students noted that they really enjoyed the course as a whole; others stated that they particularly liked the discussions. One student said:

“Being the only course I am taking that emphasizes communication and dialogue. I appreciate it.”

Another student said:

“I like the fact we get to discuss, share and absorb the articles…”

Several students mentioned that the course helped them change their perspectives. Here are some comments:

“I’ve been challenged to think about things in different lights.”
“I think a lot of what we’ve covered so far will help me once I’m in school teaching.”
“It was a breath of fresh air.”

One student said in class that he never heard of First Nations residential schools before. Another student said she always looked at the issue of homosexuality as a moral one. The lens of social justice and equity provided an alternative framework to analyze this issue.

In particular, many students commented on how instrumental WebCT was in enhancing their understanding of issues of equity and diversity in education. Here are some comments:

“WebCT engages a lot of critical thinking.”
“It has really opened my eyes to so many important issues within society that I had previously remained ignorant towards.”
“The WebCT component provides a good forum for discussion that doesn’t occur within class.”
“Combining the Web postings with in-class discussions makes the material much more interesting to follow.”
“I like the WebCT concept as it provides people like me who are quiet in class a chance to present my point of view.”
“The WebCT component works really well for me.”

However, this course was not designed for indoctrination. In the end, not everyone’s perspective was transformed. Some students argue that immigrant students should blend into our school system, and that they should “do in Room as the Romans do.” Still others view issues of equity and diversity as “political correctness”. Maybe more courses of this nature are required. Furthermore, not every student was equally enthusiastic about WebCT. Many students still had challenges with technology. We need to provide more opportunities of learning about and with technology. In addition, I also learned that technology-enhanced teaching was time-consuming. I invested time in my earlier career to learn HTML and WebCT. Even so, it still took lots of time to design and maintain the course Web site, particularly the Discussions. This was the first term the University used WebCT Vista. There were still many technical problems that need to be fixed. While it is important to integrate educational technology into teaching and learning, it is more important to provide the necessary support. Will I use WebCT if I teach this course again? Absolutely!
References