

## **Intercultural Competence and Classroom Practice**

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The motivation for this paper has come from observations, concerns and discussions focusing on students intercultural needs and identities at CSU ELC Bathurst where we teach English to newly arrived international students preparing for studies in Australian high schools and tertiary institutions. The outcome of these deliberations has been a concern with the development of intercultural competence. A concern that is raised at a number of levels, in students intercultural interactions with one another, in their interactions with teachers and staff, and in their wider interactions in the community. The first part of this paper deals with certain theoretical and pragmatic aspects of intercultural competence, in particular the establishment of a link between language and culture through the concept of genre and the intersecting notions of cultural awareness, appropriacy and authority. The second part looks at what sort of teaching and learning environments and tasks can be employed to promote the development of intercultural competence.

Whatever may be our belief or opinion about our cultural identity, who we are and how we make sense of what we do, our cultural environment is today becoming increasingly diverse and complex. The management of that diversity is most visible in the way that new ways of talking about things are used to transform old ways. In our work we have faced and continue to face shifts in the way language learning and teaching are talked about, defined and manifested. This is most apparent in our field of language learning and teaching or literacy pedagogy in the current jargon. We notice for example that new definitions of terms such as literacy have been used to direct our thinking and work in new ways. From its earliest reference to a person's ability to read and write in a language that they could speak it has undergone several transformations and shifts in emphasis from functional literacy to critical literacy and most recently multiliteracies. Exploring this most recent reference we find that multiliteracies pedagogy is a response to the increasing global intersection of cultures and the rise of new subcultural identities and affiliations which is resulting in greater global and local linguistic and cultural diversity. (The New London Group 1995:10) Servicing this diversity is the aim of a multiliteracies pedagogy where, according to its exponents

the most important skill students need to learn is to negotiate dialect differences, register differences, code switching, interlanguages and hybrid cross-cultural discourses. (The New London Group 1995:9)

The point of this brief introduction to the changing notion of literacy and its newest demands in a paper on intercultural competence is to highlight the fact that in both language learning and language teaching a fundamental feature of literacy (ours as well as our students) is the ability to manage not just linguistic but cultural variation within and across a range of contexts and modes of meaning. It is with this observation in mind that I would like to address the notion of intercultural competence.

### **Towards intercultural competence**

It is evident that what we often fail to do is successfully link the language we teach with the culture we teach or at least we fail to bring about an awareness in our students (and in

ourselves) that the classroom cultures they are immersed in are inadequate models for what awaits them. It may be that the teaching of culture has been limited to the teaching of the products of culture, cultural symbols and images or what Tedick and Walker (1994) refer to as teaching the 'surface elements of culture' the 'cultural facts'. What is often neglected are the less visible, but arguably more meaningful aspects of culture, the ideas, beliefs, values, institutions and cultural logic that are diffused through our social and cultural lives. Teaching an awareness of the more meaningful aspects of culture means bringing our students to a clear realisation that they are cultural beings immersed in a sea of evolving cultural practices and that cultural practices have informing social and historical dimensions which contribute to their meaning. Our task is to bring the 'hidden' aspects of these cultural practices and processes more sharply into focus.

### **Genre: making culture and language visible**

In the context of her work on foreign language learning and teaching Anne Freadman links literacy with the notion of genre arguing that,

'... foreign language literacy depends crucially on the predictions that derive from alertness to generic variety and from active familiarity not just with a particular genre, but with the range of genres that competence in a foreign culture requires.'(1994:2)

Freadman illustrates the concept of genre with an example from her own teaching, When I introduce the topic of "genre" to my students, I sometimes do so by asking them to plan a meal. The instructions for this exercise are quite elaborate. "Meal", I say, refers to the whole occasion, not just to what is eaten; they must plan time and place and participants, they must include any details - say of presentation - that become relevant as their plan develops. They work in small groups of three or four students, and keep a record of which decisions counted as crucial for the purposes of making further decisions... When I comment on the choices proposed, it is important to my purpose to demonstrate what I call the appropriateness principle: certain details - for example, the kind of food - follow from others - for example the place and time of day and whether the meal is to count as an ordinary or a special event (1994: 4).

Meals as we are all aware, vary according to occasion, time, place, participants, purpose etc. Notwithstanding this variation, meals, as genres, are linked by resemblances across their organising elements. Despite differing internal characteristics it is the purposeful nature of genre that enables us to recognise a social event, for example, as a meal of some type and not simply as food tasting.

Freadman's use of the term 'genre' is at variance with its current popular textual definition where genre is 'concerned with texts as a set of staged goal-oriented social processes which integrate field, mode and tenor choices in predictable ways' (Halliday & Martin, in Freadman p20). In other academic contexts genre has been defined as 'a class of communicative events' linked by a 'set of communicative purposes' (Swales 1991:58) and has been portrayed as providing a 'precise index and catalogue of the relevant social occasions of a community at a given time' e.g. interview, conversation, sale, tutorial, sports commentary, seduction, sermon etc. (Kress 1985:19)

The term genre in fact is one of those terms (like discourse) where we are forced at times to confront the limits of academic literacy. A more recent definition from The New London Group defines genre as

'an intertextual aspect of a text (showing) ... how the text links to other texts in the intertextual context, and how it might be similar in some respects to other texts used in comparable social contexts, and with text types in the order(s) of discourse'. (1995:2)

Genre as it is used in this paper draws upon the work of Freedman (1994) and Miller (1984) and is broadly defined as social action, or the configuration of social acts which constitute cultural practices, and which involve particular times, places and occasions, participants, behaviours and interactional structures. The term genre is used here to represent these recognisable yet variable sets of social practices in a broad framework of evolving social meaning. We are, here and now, engaged in the realisation of *genre* as *a way of acting together*, marked by distinctive social relations and subject positions.

In the concept of genre a link is made between language and culture, or what Miller refers to as 'communicative action and social structure' (1994:72). Miller asserts that 'the number of genres in any society is indeterminant and depends upon the complexity and diversity of society' (1984:163). Being social constructions genres evolve and are shaped by their past, continuing to change as they reflect society's broad socio-cultural interests.

Genre defined as social action places greater emphasis upon the action that the genre accomplishes than upon its form. In the definition it has been afforded here, the meaning of genre is dependent upon a person's ability to refer to and interpret a range of semiotic systems in the context of social activity. Genre in this sense is more than text schema. A major difficulty with defining genre in terms of text models is the lack of attention paid to the socially constructed nature of text, the means whereby models are transformed by particular social purposes and how they are related to their social and cultural contexts. Making the construction process more transparent by acknowledging the problematics of text representation and interpretation and investigating the intertextuality of even the most 'original' writings, will provide our students with 'thicker' descriptions of how texts are made than just providing them with generic text structures. (Our students don't want recipes they want meals!)

### **Cultural awareness, appropriacy and authority**

Underpinning the process of acquiring intercultural competence are the interconnecting notions of cultural awareness, appropriacy and authority. Figure 1 suggests that the process is a gradual one building upon and feeding back into a variety of experienced socio-cultural practices.

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Figure 1: Acquiring competence in socio-cultural practices

Experiencing a variety of social and cultural practices may give us an awareness of the 'cultural facts', but more is required if we are to develop an informed cultural awareness.

In the example given earlier, Freadman's pedagogical interest is in having students monitor the decisions that are made as the plans for the meal unfold. It is these decisions that represent cultural choices from which cultural practices emerge. An examination of decisions and choices embedded in particular social activities begins a process of making visible the cultural dimensions of genre. For example, what decisions, choices and behaviours are enacted when new friends come to visit. What preparations are made, what occurs and when, what is said and why, and who is involved in the different aspects of the visit. The answers we give to these questions and the way that we arrive at answers reveals the logic of our social and cultural practices. Monitoring processes of decision-making and choice that accompany social activity becomes an important principle in promoting an awareness of *how* cultural practices are constructed. Monitoring *why* those decisions and choices are made focuses the learners attention on principles of appropriacy and authority in cultural practice.

The principle of appropriacy is an important feature of intercultural practice. In some communicative views of language learning and teaching it has replaced accuracy as a defining feature of the successful language learner. The socially-constructed nature of language in use however, requires us to look carefully at this principle and resist the temptation to present prescribed sets of utterances, or performances or language varieties as being the *only* appropriate ones. Instead of looking at appropriacy from the perspective of sets of 'acceptable' behaviours to be learned, Ivanic suggests that appropriacy be questioned.

Learners will want to know what the conventions are, but not be drilled into reproducing them. Instead, they want to be in a position to choose confidently when and if to conform to them. ... the good language user understands how language is shaped by social forces and in turn affects other people, and acts accordingly.  
(1991:127-128)

An awareness of appropriate language, however, requires continual attention to context and the variety of semiotic cues which support it. As social constructs, conventions are subject to continual re-shaping and manipulation. Developing a critical awareness of the socially constructed nature of appropriate language is a step towards developing competence in its use in a variety of intercultural situations.

Our social interactions are characterised not only by ongoing social and linguistic adjustments defined by what we think is appropriate, but a shifting of our reasons and purposes for engaging in interaction. As purposes shift so do our strategies and the ways we act together. Social interactions can therefore be characterised as varying genre-mixes, a teacher-student interview for example may involve elements of an examination of the student's work (a review of performance) giving advice (counselling), and an informal conversation (a meeting of

friends). In this example the student would be required to handle varying degrees of formality and intersubjectivity and be required to shift through a number of subject positions as well as interpret meaning across a variety of modes: linguistic, gestural, spatial, visual and aural. The outcome would depend on how each perceived the others role and how familiar they were with the situation. Intercultural competence is therefore linked to the way we interpret and appropriately manage these mixes of social activity, our knowledge of how to vary and shift through them and our capacity to assert authority over them. Figure 2 improves our description of socio-cultural practices by making visible various modes through which the meaning of socio-cultural practices are produced and interpreted and also by revealing various strategies related to the construction of those practices, which we will now explore.

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Figure 2: Elements in the interpretation, expression and construction of socio-cultural practices.

The exercise of power and authority through language are two elements of intercultural competence most often overlooked. Freadman argues that cultural empowerment depends upon a person's capacity to negotiate shifts between genres, i.e. to take up a position of competence relative to each new set of relations we experience, and to be inventive where the way to act is not clear. Her argument highlights the need for students to access a wide range of genres and be aware of the differences or contrasts between them. To extend Freadman's argument further is to recognise that genres act to express, constitute and reproduce social identities and social relations, including relations of power. Much of our teaching, however, is based on very thin descriptions of the way these relations are manifest in daily interactions. Situated text book dialogues for example, generally fail to acknowledge the role of power and identity in the construction of communicative relations between participants.

One of our goals should be to thicken those descriptions through a closer examination of social interactions, the decisions and purposes that construct them and the contexts they occur within. Thicker descriptions will make visible a wider variety of social languages, interactional behaviours and strategies in which our students may engage, and ultimately choose from, in the employment of language. Our students need to be prepared to expect and manage not only the performance features that managing variation across genre requires, but also the power relations that are manifest.

Ivanic suggests the following to assist language learners to develop a critical awareness of language and power:

Recognise how people with power choose language which is used to describe people things and events.

Understand how the relative status of people involved affects the way we use language.

Recognise that when power relations change, language changes too - both historically and individually.

Understand how language use can either reproduce or challenge existing power relations.

Recognise how language can either be offensive or show respect - and choose your language accordingly.

Recognise what possibilities exist in current circumstances, and what the constraints are.

Learn how to (decide to) challenge existing language practice in particular circumstances.

(1991:131-132)

Developing a critical language awareness may assist students in coming to terms with some of the more subtle and confronting power-based genre shifts that are all too familiar to us.

When, for example, does a Doctor's consultation, become an invasion of privacy; when does a salesman's helpfulness become an obligation to buy; when does a frankly expressed opinion become a racist or gendered remark; when does sharing a problem become a moment of exploitation; when does a charitable act become a profitable venture. You will notice that these examples are rather extreme and may tend towards ambiguity, it is true that utterances and circumstances are multi-functional, nevertheless we recognise these as problematic, for our students they are more so. While genre shifting is not always a transparent process, it is however, a critical one. It is becoming apparent that in order to make genre shifting more visible our attention must shift to the means by which social circumstances are constructed.

## **Positioning**

The state of our social circumstances owes a lot to the influence of particular discourses operating upon our personal and social lives. A useful concept for analysing the influence of discourse in social interaction is that of 'positioning'.

Positioning is a feature of the interactive dynamics of social and cultural groupings. It is involved in the construction of people's roles and identities. It is manifest as relationships of power and influence that are constructed between people and their circumstances. In McDermot's view people are each others contexts, they form an environment for each other to act within (in Davies 1994:21). It is within this interactive environment that people find themselves positioned and are engaged in positioning themselves and others. Much of this occurs unnoticed, appearing as 'natural' as we act and are acted upon by prevailing ways of social, cultural and institutional life. Such 'ways of life' make possible certain positions through which we interact and make sense of the world.

Positioning is an integral part of the organisation of social activity. As well as being an organising feature of genre it marks shifts between genres. All of us have experienced the effects of shifts in positioning as circumstances have changed around us or we have acted to alter those circumstances. We have all witnessed the tactics of the reporter who positions an interviewee as an innocent informant through an impersonal fact finding line of questioning, the interviewee appearing to acknowledge a set of unspoken rules about how the interview should be conducted. We have also witnessed the rejection of those rules when the line of questioning shifts to a 'court room' mode of interrogation where the interviewee is positioned as one on trial. This example illustrates the role of positioning in constructing a particular genre and the way positioning marks the genre shift from interview to trial.

Intercultural competence requires a knowledge of and capacity to take up and define subject positions across a range of genres. As with the notion of appropriate language, conventional notions of role are open to question. Questioning the expectations we hold about how people should or should not behave in particular circumstances enables us to see past the taken for granted aspects of social relations and to see how language practices constitute and sustain particular subject positions.

The following questions provide an initial framework for investigating the positioning effects of discourse within genre.

- How do participants position each other and themselves?
- Who is excluded/included?
- How are positions maintained, interrupted, altered?
- How are participants, objects and circumstances labelled?
- What kinds of contexts do participants create for one another?
- What positions are available?
- Where is authority located?
- Whose interests are being served?
- How is interaction managed?
- What topics are chosen?
- How are experiences made relevant?
- How are actions justified?
- What parts of the discourse are visible/invisible, i.e. what is assumed and not assumed?
- Which discourses succeed and fail?

The process of uncovering positioning processes in discourse through questioning brings us to the point that intercultural competence requires an analysis and interpretation of strategic actions, a reflective and critical analysis not merely a technical investigation. The process of questioning how discourse means is a matter of 'problem setting' rather than 'problem solving'. Problem setting involves rendering our experiences and the contexts in which they occur as problematic, and questioning our taken-for-granted assumptions. It is concerned with not only *what* our experiences mean, but also with *how* they mean, what shapes them, what makes them intelligible. It may begin by exploring the names or labels we give to our experiences, and the ways we frame or conceptualise them. It may continue by examining the taken-for-granted features of our social world and making connections between what we currently know and

what is happening around us. As Rein and Schon observe, the process of problem setting is important because, 'the questions we ask shape the answers we get.'(1984:56)

### **Towards a community of learners**

There is a need for both teachers and students to collaboratively and critically look at notions of genre, genre-shifting, positioning, cultural awareness, appropriacy and authority and the way familiar and unfamiliar social and cultural experiences are 'named' and 'framed'. Of importance to the development of a collaborative approach is the concept of a community of learners.

This concept finds expression in the engagement of both teachers and learners in a collaborative classroom practice, a 'pedagogical partnership'. In constructing this partnership, we are concerned with beginning as closely as possible to the place where students are at, how they view their circumstances, how they view the language they are learning and the way they are learning it. We are interested in their motivations for learning English, their interests and expectations. We are also interested in the social processes, to which we contribute, which shape their identities.

#### *Students and their identities*

Much of what our students seek in their new circumstances is an identity, and an expectation that that identity be acknowledged as having importance. Our students desire to be recognised as 'being somebody' in their new circumstances.

The desire to interact with another society or culture does not begin solely with a desire to learn the language, it often begins with a desire to connect with people or various material aspects of the new society and culture. Language is seen as the means by which these specific interests can be realised. It is, however, also seen as the chief obstacle to realising those interests. As one student recently wrote in a class magazine,

*We face the window in the dark house.  
We can see beautiful views of outside through the window.  
We want to go outside.  
But we don't have the ability to open the window.  
We must continue strengthening ourselves to realise our desire....  
We see the outside world through the window where people are completely good at English. We have to learn English to be similar to that state. On the day when we open the window fully and join the outside world we will feel great achievement.*  
t  
(Windows 1995, Hee Jae Ho)

Like this student, many students feel their lack of English language competence excludes them from active participation in a world they wish to be a part of. It makes visible their foreignness, their difference, their distinctiveness. For them English is both disabling and enabling, it is both the constraint on their admission into a new social and cultural life, and also the means whereby they can move into it. Most teachers are familiar with this learner view of the enabling effects of English and have come to know that much more is required.

This student positions herself as one excluded from a world she wishes to be part of but can only look upon. It is a circumstance she represents in contrasting terms, inside the world of the



dark house and outside in the beautiful world 'where people are completely good at English'. To help her to explore this perspective and its positioning effects, would require us to address the contrasts she has used to construct this view - outside/inside, dark house/beautiful world, ability/inability, English/not English - and to jointly construct other more refined possibilities to replace these dichotomised categories. It would also be important to explore this text in relation to classroom and institutional contexts. To explore to what extent the student is the author of these observations, to what extent other social processes are involved. To examine, for example, the way the curriculum and wider institutional practices have shaped this student's image of herself, her colleagues and her circumstances. To do this would begin a process of helping this student and others like her, to make new sense of what they experience, to better understand and handle their own feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty as well as different cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes, with their associated contradictions, conflicts and discursal positionings. In pedagogical terms this requires that we begin to make visible the processes of identity-construction which are occurring in our classroom and institutional contexts, and explore the images being constructed and sustained.

### *Teachers as pedagogical partners*

Teaching is about constructing contexts with and for learners. The paradox of working with newly arrived international students is that on one hand there is often a need to provide predictable teaching environments and yet that predictability if not monitored may degenerate into repetitious teaching practices and routines.

In fact one of our most important teaching and learning moments, may be the point where we vary the type of learning experiences that we and our students are engaged in. Varying the configuration of classroom cultural practices, the times, places, participants, and behaviours, the way everyone dresses, speaks, gestures, the use of space and the formality of interaction, the time when we alter the 'name' and 'frame' of what constitutes language teaching and learning in the minds of our students as well as our own minds.

It has been in these altered contexts that teachers at CSU ELC have endeavoured to enrich processes of identity construction in the midst of developing genuine dialogue with and between students through what Ivanic refers to as 'person respecting language'. Person-respecting language is aimed at making students aware of the 'patronising, demeaning, disrespectful, offensive, exclusive...' uses of language and to provide a framework of social and cultural understanding and acceptance by tying it to what Ivanic asserts as, 'the intentions to 'do as you would be done by' (1991:129). The point of this teaching orientation is to construct an atmosphere of assurance in which students are able to engage in genuine dialogue, an environment where students' own discourse positions are not imposed upon or colonised. This orientation is not intended to replace students' ways of looking at the world or behaving in it, but to provide a way of accessing other perspectives through which the world can be viewed and engaged. In opposition to discourses which seek to overthrow or dominate others, Bronwyn Davies expresses an interest in the development of a similar kind of conversation, one that is not disabling but enabling,

...there is (she says) another kind of conversation in which each listens to the other, not to find the weak points through which it can be entered and dismantled, but to comprehend what is said from the point of view of the speaker and to see whether one's own

understanding can be elaborated, made richer, expanded in the light of the new way of seeing made possible by listening to the other. 'Do you mean ...', 'Is that the same as ...', 'That sounds like the time I ...' are the kinds of opening responses used in such conversations ... In listening to others in this way, one multiplies the possible ways in which the world can be seen and experienced, one achieves through such conversation, the possibility of multiple 'I's' (selves) who can know and talk about the world from more than the one position of a single ego locked into a unitary interpretation of the world. (1994:27)

If we treat our teaching opportunities monologically and ignore the possibilities for genuine enabling conversation of this kind we place limits on the rich cultural complexity and diversity of our classrooms and cultivate an imitative model of language learning. The point is that many students reject the way we position them as imitators of language which happens when we treat language as an object, i.e. as content to be learned. To treat language as an object is to strip away opportunities for student's reflective examination of its practice, and to deny students the chance of reflecting upon their own cultural values and beliefs that interaction with others who see things differently can give them. In this way we treat our students as objects of our instruction rather than 'pedagogical partners' (Young 1992:87). In such cases Young observes that students,

'may not explicitly ask what justifies the formality, asymmetry and coldness of classroom talk, they may simply turn away from it to seek the warmth of the peer group and seek to bring that situation, unofficially, into the classroom - which of course they do....' (pp.66-67)

In contrast to a 'language as object' orientation, a 'language as subject' orientation, that which acts, (Tedick & Walker 1994) suggests that language learning is essentially a process of socialisation that requires a narrowing of the social distance between teacher and learner, where language is treated as a vehicle as well as a focal point of classroom learning. This then suggests that we examine the purposeful and consequential aspects of the learning activities we provide.

#### *The concepts of task and collaborative reflective learning*

Against a teachers idealised version of what a particular language learning task is, students place their own conceptions, motivations and interests. In a pedagogical partnership it is important that students interpretations or reinterpretations of tasks be acknowledged and engaged. Students reactions to tasks are as important as the tasks themselves. Pursuing and exploring these reactions openly in class has the effect of converting tasks into authentic social events managed at different levels of interpersonal interaction at different points of time. Tasks should generate a *need* for the expression of genre and linguistic forms students will require rather than just generating the forms. The task-in-process orientation takes teacher-student collaboration beyond the level of jointly working on problems to the point of jointly defining problems.

It acknowledges students ongoing need to 'learn how to learn' as tasks are interpreted and reinterpreted in a process of collaborative reflective learning, as a means of social and cultural inquiry.

The process of collaborative reflective learning we have adopted at CSU ELC involves students in describing, interpreting, and evaluating experiences as illustrated in Figure 3.

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Figure 3: Collaborative reflective learning: exploring socio-cultural practices and experiences

Beginning with concrete social experiences students describe what has occurred by asking, 'What happened?' and 'How did I feel?'. Following their descriptions students are assisted to interpret their experiences by generalising them and interpreting at both a personal and a broader social and cultural level, asking 'How did this experience come about?', 'How was it different to previous experiences?', 'What do these things mean?'; 'Why are they important or significant?' and 'What social and cultural values and ideas are represented?'. Finally students evaluate their interpretations, re-evaluate their experiences and explore alternatives asking 'What have I learned?', 'What is the best way to act?', 'What adjustments can be made?' and 'What effects will changes have?'. As Young asserts,

The capacity for (students) to enter into inquiry develops gradually. In the process of analysis, (teachers) must adapt their communication to the appropriate stage of the analysis, changing their communicative role and their level and kind of communicative participation as their (students) undergo or pass through stages of analysis such as transference.(1992:55)

In the context of this reflective model of learning teachers and students are able to engage in a variety of experience-based tasks which aim is to stimulate new ways of seeing, interpreting and engaging in social experiences that underpin cultural practices.

The focus of collaborative reflective learning is both the critiquing of cultural experience and the enlargement of the capacity for critique. This capacity is developed through improving students awareness of conventional social and cultural practices, norms and roles, and having them argue the appropriateness of those elements on the basis of the principles they represent. Through the process of developing an argument, a point of view, or perspective, students improve in their capacity to use language to persuade others with propriety and force. As they move through this process of reflexive inquiry their capacity to use language for social purposes becomes 'less context-dependent, more reflexive, abstract, individually differentiated and generalised.' (Young 1992:55)

A task-in-process orientation provides a broad framework for supported activity where students and teachers work together, where both are encouraged to identify, interrogate and report

feelings, ideas, or points of view as the tasks or topics evolve. This model is used in conjunction with the following activities as they contribute to what we refer to as developing the cultural monitor.

### **Developing the cultural monitor**

#### *Dilemmas*

In the sessions devoted to these tasks students are presented with dilemmas, on topics with which they are familiar, to explore and resolve. Faced with situations in which difficult choices have to be made between a number of courses of action, students are expected to acknowledge and take into account a variety of perspectives when making their decisions and choices. Both the content and process of dilemma resolution are monitored. Students are required to do more than generate and criticise points of view as cognitive activities but also to develop the social capacity and skills for entering into argumentation. Debriefing these dilemmas requires students and teachers to reflect upon their own and others beliefs, values and logic, to make clear the basis upon which their interpretations and decisions were made, to explore definitions, to defend their positions, (what do you mean and why?). In doing so, students uncover and explore the bases and consequences of particular patterns of resolution. Uncovering the basis for beliefs, actions and attitudes, requires an examination of how situations and circumstances are defined. Defining is a process of perceiving and interpreting events as particular types. Students, for example, who define a classroom discussion as a disagreement and withdraw from participation, may have focused on elements of the discussion which are a type of their own cultural definition of contention, fight or disagreement. These students have limited understanding of the purpose of class discussion and little experience of the part it plays in turning experience into learning. They fail to see that they are able to use themselves as instruments of learning. A student recently gave details of a misunderstanding involving the use of the term 'mate' which he took to be a recurring offensive remark aimed at him, and which ended in a fight. His own strategies for negotiating this misunderstanding were inadequate. His response was based upon a personal definition of what the word meant without taking into consideration the broader social messages of what others were doing or what was happening around him. It is important to have students interpret situations (often in the midst of acting them out) against the broader social context in which they are acting, in this way they can be helped to reach an understanding of the cultural logic of situations and to develop the understanding and skill to manage them.

#### *Socio-drama*

Socio-drama is an opportunity for students to assume multiple identities and positions through performance employing a multi-modal orientation (visual, gestural, spatial, audio and linguistic). A socio-drama can be based on fictionalised or real social situations which relate closely to the students worlds. In the context of a theme on relationships for example, the notions of genre shifting and positioning can be explored. In the first phase, students are provided with short scripted versions of social situations about developing new friendships, which they act out and talk about alternating roles and positions. In the second phase teachers provide a variety of interactive situations to be performed, in which both competing and cooperative interests are outlined and which require a resolution. Unexpected circumstances maybe introduced and the performance frozen at different points as students are required to initiate and manage various genre shifts. Students can suggest alternative actions, strategies, language and perspectives. Finally, students construct their own socio-drama in which they act

out their own negotiated situations to be played out in the midst of an agreed upon social context. Each phase of the socio-drama can be videoed and debriefed.

Social activity differs in degrees of formality, levels of intersubjectivity, familiarity and perceived status differences between roles - these variables can be manipulated in the construction of a socio-drama.

For example:

- Eating in a restaurant with friends or in the school/university dining hall could be characterised as having low levels of formality and status differences with high levels of familiarity and intersubjectivity.
- Participating in a meeting or interview with the headmaster or faculty dean could be characterised as having high levels of formality and status differences and low levels of familiarity and intersubjectivity.
- Attending a school/university social may be seen as having mixed levels of formality, familiarity, intersubjectivity and status differences.

Such examples may be the basis for the first phase of a socio-drama to which other situations may be added or inserted.

In our teaching context for example, it is important for our students to be able to take up a variety of subject positions in high school and university contexts. For our students to better understand school/university classroom related genres and their place in them, they need to be construed in terms of the social acts that sustain them. This can be accomplished by examining and acting out various classroom situations and exploring the sense that students make of their experiences. Just as important as developing this competence in 'classroom/academic' genres is the need for students to develop competence in a variety of institutional and social genres to enable the development of collegial links with students and staff for the purpose of full participation in the life of the institution. This requires engaging in the generic activities of study groups, student representative councils, social activities, meetings, clubs and committees, etc.

In its most enabling form, socio-drama is about monitoring, negotiating and adjusting language and behaviour in the context of sets of circumstances which arise from students own worlds. This is where students raise and resolve their own difficulties, where they 'insist' on making sense of things for themselves, where they co-create the communicative context, where they construct interpersonal realities characterised by the risks and uncertainties of authentic social interaction.

### *Reader Response*

Reader response is aimed at multiplying the possible 'reading formations' that students bring to texts, in order to undo the illusion of one social and cultural reality. It also aims to make visible and explore the social and cultural values embedded in texts and in their construction.

Students are asked to respond to the way people behave and act in various familiar social situations represented in a variety of texts across a variety of modes. They talk about what they believe to be appropriate or inappropriate behaviour and judge the authenticity and likelihood of the depicted situations against the background of their own experience. Teachers take the opportunity to discuss notions of cultural appropriacy and authority as they are represented in the way characters influence and talk to each other. Students are invited to share their own responses to the situations and to explore their thoughts on how the circumstances and texts have come about. In this way students make explicit their own cultural formations and confront other formations introduced by the text and other students. The underlying thrust of reader response is the view that meanings are not put into texts by writers but are constructed by readers. Readers bring their own socially and culturally derived languages and understandings (reading formations) to a text and make sense of it against these backgrounds, determining which parts are relevant and necessary in order for an understanding to be constructed. Understandings in our teaching contexts are however, constrained by available discourses. Increasing the range of discourses available to our students is an aim of reader response and an outgrowth of a genre-based approach to teaching as we undertake to introduce generic variety into our work.

### *The collective biography*

To undertake to develop students/teachers cultural monitors, autobiographical accounts of specific events and experiences related to students and teachers daily lives are collectively explored.

Collective biographies are a way of bringing the threads of common experiences together to develop shared interpretations of what we do, think and feel. They become the basis for making visible the taken for granted assumptions we hold about the way we live, work and learn. They involve selecting an experience or topic, constructing autobiographical accounts, jointly reading these accounts, discussing them to explore common areas of experience and in the process aiming to develop shared and refined understandings of the social and cultural forces which have shaped those circumstances. A shared understanding of circumstances provides a basis for further collaborative investigations of them. In terms of the reflective learning cycle this means further reflection, interpretation and evaluation. Collective biographies provide a means of accessing and exploring the terms upon which students and teachers position themselves and are positioned, the labels they use, and the way they name and frame their experiences.

There is one orientation to collective biography which is not so clinically derived but nevertheless involves students in thick descriptions of the way social and cultural relations are manifest in the course of daily interactions. For example, the collective biography which emerges in the midst of the authentic and real interactions we have with our students each day. I think of the students who come for assistance, or just to talk between classes and in free times; of a particular student who rang one of our teachers during the holidays because he was bored and wanted to stay with her family; of the student who asked a teacher for help to relocate to a new flat; of the students who ring to talk about problems, who come and visit, who bring and introduce their families, who send cards, who continue to write, who send email messages to keep in touch with teachers, who go to the movies on weekends with them, or eat out with them, who enjoy an association of mutual respect and friendship. In this sense

the thick descriptions I have referred to earlier are not detailed textbook accounts of cultural behaviour where the world is captured for the purposes of analysis or explanation, they are what Geertz (1975) calls 'the flow of social discourse', the lived experiences that we share with our students - the outcomes of how we relate to them when we don't have to relate to them. To the extent that we allow our students genuine access to our own interpretive frameworks (our personal feelings, opinions, doubts, etc.) we awaken a process whereby their own genuine, authentic communications and interests are activated and engaged. Increasing the semiotic frameworks of our own classrooms and institutional settings is more than providing a multi-modal approach to our work it requires us to enter into authentic conversations and relations with our students and colleagues. In this way a genuine collective biography emerges through a sharing of human interests, through the development of points of commonality and, to use Miller's words, an increased ability to 'participate in the actions of a community'. (Miller 1994)

### **Beyond classroom practice**

As Figure 4 illustrates, intercultural competence as it has been represented here, involves participation in the ongoing and unfolding act of monitoring and managing differences across a range of social and cultural instances, interpreting social and cultural meanings through a variety of modes (visual, gestural, spatial, audio and linguistic) and making adjustments based on new understandings of social and cultural practices.

**(Figure was not able to be reproduced)**

Figure 4. Acquiring intercultural competence through collaborative reflective learning

The relationship between intercultural competence and collaborative reflective learning, is a relationship which goes beyond the classroom and forms the basis of a social rather than individual exploration of the new sets of relationships and experiences our students are engaging in.

For our classroom practice, rather than the teaching of specific genre formations as instances of cultural practice, our efforts are best aimed at a collaborative exploration of different ways of knowing and living in the context of assisting students to develop the skills to manage such

difference. Collaboration as an integral part of socio-cultural activity and learning is positioned in the reflective learning process to teach its need both in and beyond the classroom.

The strategies outlined above aim to reduce the sense of uncertainty that students feel as they orientate themselves in a new social and cultural environment. Helping students to develop a framework that allows them to make sense of their social experiences generates within them the capacity to act, and act in appropriate and authoritative ways. Providing points of reference for them allows them to gauge their own positions and determine directions for future action. For most of us the reference points are provided by the sets of relationships within which we live and by the understandings that go with them. The problem for our students is understanding the assumptions which underpin these new sets of relationships. Without strategies for coming to an understanding of these assumptions, their new experiences will make little sense and remain unpredictable.

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