Cultural Competence and Teaching OU Students

Introduction
This document is, in part, a response to a request from Associate Lecturers (ALs) in the Open University (OU) in the East Midlands. Over 1/3 of ALs who completed a regional questionnaire said they would appreciate some training or development to help them address issues of race and ethnicity at work. So, this document is designed to offer ALs practical ideas that can inform and enhance their teaching and support to a diverse student community. Because the document builds on ‘Alternative Perspectives on Islam’, the focus is on working with Muslim students. However, the competency model that has been used in the document can be applied to working with all students, whatever their beliefs and practices. So, the document has both a specific and a broader application.

‘Alternative Perspectives on Islam’, sub-titled ‘Encouraging Contemporary Debate’, was organised by the OU in the East Midlands and hosted by Nottingham Castle in September 2008. The debate was based around discussions raised in the OU’s course AD252 Islam in the West: The Politics of Co-existence and was chaired by course author Dr David Herbert. He was joined by Dilwar Hussain, Head of Policy Research at the Islamic Foundation and Commissioner on the Commission for Racial Equality, and Dr Bano Murtuja, Senior Associate at Vis-à-Vis Research Consultancy and Chair of the BME Health and Social Care Forum.

Cultural competence

_Culture_ signifies the different social values, norms and meanings held by different groups. For example, some cultures expect students to debate and discuss ideas with their tutor, whereas other cultures expect students to treat their tutor as an authority, accepting their pronouncements unquestioningly. **Cultural competence** is the ability to work sensitively with culturally diverse groups and involves approaching people who are culturally different from oneself, “with openness and respect – a willingness to learn” ¹. So, cultural competence doesn’t mean the abandonment or disparagement of one’s own culture, rather it involves responding positively to different cultural backgrounds. Consequently, being culturally competent is based in some knowledge of the various cultural communities from which students come and, as a partial address to this, this document provides some information about the beliefs and practices often associated with Islam. Being culturally competent is also based on adopting teaching practices which promote inclusive learning, by offering teaching that’s congruent with all students’ values, beliefs and styles of learning. With a diverse student body, this often involves a exploiting a range of teaching methods. So, whilst this could involve using a tutorial as a forum for discussion and debate, it could also involve using the tutorial as a forum for more collaborative working projects. So, cultural competence depends on not only the application of background knowledge but, also the adoption of best practice. It is when such skills, knowledge and practice come together and become embedded in all of our work that we are beginning to work in a culturally competent way.

¹ O’Hagan K., _Cultural Competence in the Caring Professions_, 2001, p235 in Open University Diversity in the Workplace e-Learning Module
Cultural Diversity in The OU’s Student Population: numbers of OU registrants from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups
2006/7: 11.2%
2007/8: increased to 11.7% (as of 2 October 2008)
2008/9: increased to 12.3% (as of 2 October 2008)

Comparative completion rates
2006/7: 7.7% higher for white students than BME students

Comparative attainment rates
2006/7: 20.3% higher for white students than BME students

There are three key reasons why cultural competence is of interest to ALs. First, it’s a foundation for effective teaching in a culturally diverse environment. It’s part of an equality model, which accepts that everyone “has the same right to equality of opportunity in acquiring skills and the provision of services” 4. However, this doesn’t involve “treating everyone the same”, rather it “entails equalising… inequalities” and “creating a level playing field for all” 5. Adopting a cultural competency model, which responds to individuals’ needs and learning styles, is more likely to ensure that our teaching practices will be effective for all of our students. Engaging with multiculturalism in this way shouldn’t be difficult for ALs: learning about our students’ various cultures should come easily, as ALs are not only effective learners but also they already take much responsibility for their personal and professional development.

Second, some concept of cultural competence is assumed by laws governing education, including The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, which “places a specific duty on the University to monitor…students in the areas of admission and progression” and which places a general duty on not only the institution but also its employees to “promote equality of opportunity” 6.

Finally, as part of this duty, the OU’s Equality and Diversity policy says that we promote “educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all” (http://www.open.ac.uk/equality-diversity/pics/d74622.doc). If we are to act on this policy, our teaching has to reach all students with equal efficacy.

Applying cultural competence when working with Muslim students

This section provides some of the specific knowledge needed to put cultural competence into practice when teaching and supporting Muslim students. It also offers practical suggestions as to how this knowledge can usefully inform practice, whether you are working with people who are ‘cultural Muslims’, that is to say, they adopt some of the cultural norms associated with Islam but don’t have any religious beliefs, or people who are practising Muslims, that is to say, they not only adopt certain cultural norms but, also have Islamic religious beliefs. This section begins with an outline of Islam and some discussion of key festivals. This is, however, only a very brief introduction and the resources listed below suggest further reading.

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2 Hart, M, Review of the Widening Participation Strategy and Proposals for further development up till 2011/12, OU Student Services, 2008, p15
3 Attainment was measured by the number of distinctions, grade 2 passes and merits awarded at levels 2 and 3
4 http://open.marshallacmtraining.co.uk/, accessed 20.11.2008
5 http://open.marshallacmtraining.co.uk/, accessed 20.11.2008
6 http://open.marshallacmtraining.co.uk/, accessed 20.11.2008
**QUESTION:** How will I know when I’m teaching a Muslim student?

**ANSWER 1:** The student may tell you.

**ANSWER 2:** The student’s dress may indicate that they’re Muslim (eg see the section below on the hijab, niqab and burqua)

**ANSWER 3:** The student’s name may suggest that they’re Muslim. For example, in the East Midlands, there are a number of people whose family origins lie in the Indian sub continent. Muslim women from the Indian sub-continent may have names such as: Fatima Begum; Bushra Abdul; Nadia Butt. Muslim men’s names from the Indian sub-continent include: Muhammad Ahmad; Omar Muhammad; Hassan Omar. Of course, Muslims come from other places, too, and naming practices will differ in different countries. ALs also need to be mindful that someone is not necessarily Muslim just because they have a ‘Muslim’ name. For example, someone from a Muslim family may leave the faith but continue to use their given name.

**ANSWER 4:** It’s possible that one of your students may be Muslim without you being aware of this. Herein lies one of the advantages of cultural competency. An approach that treats all people with openness, respect and a willingness to learn is rarely – if ever – going to be insensitive or cause offence.

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Islam is a major world religion. Muslims believe that the prophet Muhammad received a series of revelations from God. These say that God is supreme, eternal and all-powerful, controlling the course of events. On the Last Day, Muslims believe that God will judge people according to their acts and assign them to either heaven or hell. The revelations were first memorised and later written down in the Qur’an, the Islamic holy book. Muslims believe this is the word of God, rather than the words of Muhammad and because of this the physical text of the Qur’an is treated with great respect.

Muslims have five principal duties to fulfil as part of their faith and these are usually termed the ‘Five Pillars of Islam’. The first duty is the profession of faith. The second is ritual prayer. There is a requirement that, after cleansing in water, Muslims pray to God using a certain form of words five times daily while facing Mecca, birthplace of the prophet Muhammad. The main weekly prayer time is noon on Fridays and practising Muslims may attend a mosque. The third duty is the giving of alms.

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If you need to contact a student who you know is a Muslim, or you who think may be a Muslim, it is best not to phone them on a Friday afternoon or evening.
Any regular commitment has time management implications. With the increasing use of electronic submission, a commitment that falls on a Friday can be a particular issue if a TMA deadline also regularly falls on a Friday. If a Muslim student has a Friday deadline, you could advise them that it’s perfectly permissible to submit TMAs in advance of the deadline and also help them to plan their time to enable them to do so.

The fourth duty is to fast during Ramadan. This occurs in the ninth month of the Islamic calendar which is based on the lunar year. This means that the timing of the festival moves back about two days each calendar year. Fasting involves total abstinence from food and drink throughout daylight hours and is a period for physical discipline as well as spiritual contemplation. The end of Ramadan is marked with the festival of Eid ul-Fitr (often known only as Eid). The final duty is the pilgrimage, known as the Hajj, to Mecca held during the twelfth Islamic month. All Muslims have a duty to make the Hajj at least once during their life.

Many Muslims appreciate a little food or drink as soon as the fast ends. This can be incorporated into evening tutorials during Ramadan when a tutorial coincides with nightfall by offering students a short break. Before the tutorial ask the student if they’d appreciate a break and, if so, timetable this into your planning.


You can find out when dusk is at http://www.gaisma.com/en/

Sharia law is based on traditional Islamic scholarship and informs Muslims how to behave. It deals with everything from matters of state to day-to-day life and is divided into two main sections: one addresses acts of worship, and the other concerns human interaction, such as financial transactions, marriage and divorce, food and drink, and so on. While Sharia law may change, some issues remain constant, such as the ban on alcohol and laws around sexual relations.

Awareness of Sharia law may be very useful if we’re discussing subjects such as those identified above: business practices and morality and legality. We need to be aware of the plurality of positions that are possible and how culture – Islamic or Western - may inform these. This clearly applies to a wide number of subjects, such as philosophy and literature; social science and psychology; many health and social care courses; as well as business studies and law. However, it also applies in subjects which are sometimes seen as culturally neutral, such as maths and IT. Not only are such subjects predicated on a certain way of understanding and making sense of the world but also, illustrative examples are frequently culturally specific, too.
One visible aspect of Islamic culture is the choice of some Muslim women to wear:

the hijab: a headscarf that leaves the face clear

the niqab: a veil that covers the face but leaves the eyes clear

the burqa: a full length garment covering the face and body

While some in the West may view this as restrictive or even oppressive, many argue that the freedom to dress according to religious convictions is important because principles of mutual tolerance and respect are keystones of social justice.

Further, wearing a veil may be a source of pride and a way to construct a positive Muslim identity. Some research has found that the choice of whether to wear the hijab was as often related to identity and self-confidence as to concerns about modesty.  

Questions to consider when planning tutorials include:

• What kind of learning environment is most familiar to my students and what can I do to make my teaching practice comfortable for them?

• How do my students’ cultural backgrounds influence their conception of learning and how can I use this knowledge to inform my practice?

• How can I design authentic learning activities, that is, ones that incorporate my students’ cultural values and traditions?

• How do the students see the role of the teacher and how can I work with this?

• How can I respond to the kind of working relationship my students want with their tutor through flexible and responsive tutoring?

• What types of feedback will be most motivating for my students?

• How can I ensure a range of different forms of support are in place, e.g., tutor led dialogues, as well as peer group support?

• How can I establish flexible student roles and responsibilities in tutorials on on-line forums?

• Can I offer a range of channels of communication: phone, email, face to face…?

• How can I create tasks for self-direction, ownership and collaboration?  

Photograph courtesy of Fourninety

7 See Osler and Hussain (2005) in AD252 Islam in the West, Study Guide, p213

Conclusion

Teaching practice needs at its foundation cultural competence, in order to engage with the ideals of inclusive student-focused teaching. Cultural competence assists this process by encouraging reflection on our own and other cultures, by extending our knowledge of those cultures and communities, and by reflecting on the way that this impacts on both our practice and the student experience. We hope that this short document will help you to consider some of these points, as well as to develop your teaching in ways that are satisfying for both you and your students.

Written by Dr Evelyn Kerslake and Dr Janine Liladhar, November 2008

Useful resources

Books
Herbert, D., AD252 Islam in the West: the politics of co-existence

Web resources
http://www3.open.ac.uk/courses/bin/p12.dll?C01iAD252
http://www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/leading_diversity/index.php
Open University Equality policies http://www.open.ac.uk/foi/p5_3.shtml