Cultural diversity through transformative action research: translating ideas into real world impact

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According to the World Bank, in 2013 more than 215 million people were living outside their countries of birth, and the United Nations Population Fund outlined that if all international migrants lived in the same place they would constitute the world's fifth most populous country. In other words, the world's migrant population is greater than at any other time in history and is expected to grow further. As a result of this ever-increasing human mobility, cultural diversity is a *fait accompli*. For this reason the mission of the Alfred Deakin Research Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation (ADRI-CG), since its inception in 2001, has been to work towards fostering intercultural understanding, human rights and social inclusion through transformative action research and within multidisciplinary approaches. Further, the Institute is mindful that academic work alone is not enough to effect lasting change in both policy and practice, and as such continually seeks strategic partnerships and effective dissemination strategies to influence public policy, and reach communities both locally and globally.

Transformative action is fundamentally about research that involves ideas, discoveries and tools that seek to radically shift our understanding of practices and leads to a paradigmatic shift in the field in question. Further, and in the context of social sciences research focused on cultural rights and intercultural relations, transformative action research exhibits three key characteristics.

The first key feature of transformative research around cultural diversity and social justice is a *transdisciplinary* orientation; that is to include scholars from across the humanities, the social sciences and at times health, and environmental studies to examine complex phenomena associated with rights and equality. Within such an approach, ADRI-CG conducts cutting-edge interdisciplinary projects that bring together scholars from diverse fields to develop innovative conceptual frameworks capable of accounting for complex and often delicate social, cultural and intercultural phenomena. A good illustrative example of this multidimensional approach is a current project that explores the impact of the mapping of the indigenous genome on identity formation, which brings together expertise from medicine, public health, and anthropology.

The second key component of transformative action research is that it needs to be *trans-sectoral,* wherein one collaborates with multiple societal actors such as civil society organizations (CSOs), philanthropic foundations, industry groups, decision makers and practitioners. This kind of multilayered partnership is critical not only for generating external resources and networks often vital for the successful completion of the project, but more importantly it ensures an optimal level of research uptake and scalability. In other words, for transformative research on cultural rights to achieve positive change it needs to engage the key stakeholders from the early stages of the research design and not at a post-completion dissemination stage. This is especially relevant for research on intercultural relations, racism, social justice and minority rights where a genuine ownership of the research agenda is all the more important.

The third element of transformative action research is its increasingly *transnational* orientation. This is linked to the nature of globalization and the emergence of shared problems that transcend the nation state borders, most notably the rise of global terrorism and its consequent notions of human insecurity. Thus, research in this space must not only engage with communities around the world, but must also incorporate their different epistemic frameworks to reach a common understanding and possibly a shared solution. This is also important in research projects pertaining to cultural claims and human rights, as methodological rigidity can amount to a form of exclusion from the knowledge construction process itself.

Strategic partnerships

Recognizing the need to be both transdisciplinary and globally oriented, ADRI-CG actively works with local councils, government agencies, peak bodies and philanthropic organizations to tackle issues around cultural diversity and social inclusion. For example, during the 2009-2014 period, in partnership with a local consortium of CSOs and with funding from the Australian Research Council and local agencies, institute researchers undertook an extensive research project that mapped the networking activities of migrant youth in Australia at the level of accessing formal (for example, government agencies, non-government support services) and informal (for example, family) networks. A key driver behind this collaborative project is to examine the extent to which certain networking

An interactive touch panel at the IYMO exhibition

practices are linked to particular outcomes such as the subjective sense of connectedness and belonging in a multicultural society. Along similar lines, the institute currently undertakes a number of significant projects that, in collaboration with national and international universities, international agencies and philanthropic organizations, explore the complex problem of minority rights across the globe focusing on issues such as Islamic religiosity in Australia, France and the United States, intercultural understanding in educational institutions, local governance of cultural diversity, and sectarianism in the Middle East among others.

However, while the institute recognizes the need to engage with both local and international societal actors, it is also aware that this represents only one part of the challenge of effective uptake and optimal outreach of its research findings. Two additional essential ingredients relate to how best to effect the research-policy nexus and how to utilize non-traditional and innovative dissemination methods. Such strategies can raise public awareness of these critical issues and in the process lead to sustainable positive change in public policy and practice.

The research-policy nexus is the critical intersection between the scholarly endeavour of identifying, interrogating and exposing social ills and injustices, and academic outreach which entails effecting positive change through awakening and capturing the public imagination. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to knowledge translation, one of the more effective means is to take a non-adversarial approach and work with government agencies,

rather than simply and strictly lobby against them. Yet, partnerships with government departments present their own unique challenges in that there is often a dissonance between actionable priorities of researchers and policy makers.

Nevertheless, as the aim is to promote tangible social transformations, cultural rights (the right to participate in cultural life, enjoy one's own culture and so on, in accordance with international law) and intercultural/interfaith dialogue, the institute firmly believes that this can only be achieved by overcoming these difficulties and bridging the existing gap between research, policy and practice. A key is to work within the different strictures under which the public sector operates. With the advent of a world that is increasingly dominated by global forces and transnational issues that feed into a 24-hour news cycle, the salience of issues is often transitory, which makes it essential to communicate research findings and recommendations more efficiently. Indeed, the institute strives in every project to produce two streams of outputs. Naturally, there is the academic output in the form of refereed papers and authored monographs. But institute researchers also seek to consistently produce ancillary outputs in the form of reports and briefs that provide succinct analysis and recommendations in accessible language. Importantly, these reports and briefs, in line with element two of transformative action, are not done in isolation. Rather, they are co-produced with external stakeholders and partners such as government agencies and CSOs.

Working in close partnerships with agencies and CSOs has two distinct advantages. The first is that the outcome is co-owned, and speaks on behalf of the community rather than to the community. Further, in co-producing reports with local stakeholders it gives a voice to those that are on the margins. In other words, by working with stakeholders one is more effectively able to recentre the voices of those communities in question and highlight cultural diversity and the right to have dual or multiple identities. A good example of this is a number of reports that the institute has produced with both established and more recent diasporas such as the Arabic, Italian, Vietnamese, Tongan and Macedonian communities in Australia, in conjunction with both state agencies and local community organizations, which highlight the continued attachment to one's heritage culture, without precluding a strong identification as Australian. Effectively such reports illustrate that national identity should not preclude cultural rights, thus allowing notions of multiple fluid attachment. Indeed, due to increasing human mobility and transnational relationships, such a rethink regarding multiple belongings is vital for a functional national identity going forward.

Innovative outreach

In line with this ethos, the institute also looks to pursue other non-traditional dissemination formats which can have a profound impact in the wider community. For example, institute researchers have been experimenting with the use of digital technologies and other visual media in an attempt to combat social ills, most notably racism. Despite the fact that Australia has come a long way and has a vibrant multicultural society, racism is still a very real problem. In order to help people understand what it feels like to be the butt of a racist joke or comment, institute researchers (in partnership with other universities and CSOs) sought out an innovative way to try and provide people with a safe yet immersive experience. This led to the development of the Everyday Racism App, which dares people to take the seven-day racism challenge. Alongside this, they also helped to design an interactive museum exhibition to engage people on issues of race and identity.

Drawing on the real-life experiences of people who have been a target of racist behaviours, the app allows you to choose between being an Aboriginal man, Muslim woman, Indian student, or yourself, and to live in their shoes for a week. The researchers have identified that 30-40 per cent of the Australian population is ambivalent towards cultural diversity. It is hoped that the app "will help users become more familiar with racist scenarios, so they can safely intervene when they do encounter racism." Since its launch in early 2014 the app has been downloaded more than 6,000 times. The innovative design and approach has recently been recognized by the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) Intercultural Innovation Awards.

Running from 2012 to 2015, the 'Using Museums to Combat Racism' project explores the appropriateness, feasibility and acceptability of the exhibition entitled *Identity, Yours, Mine, Ours* (IYMO) with regard to fostering reflection on identity and increasing acceptance of cultural diversity among secondary school students in the years 10-12 and teachers. The exhibition, developed in consultation with the research team,

Promotional material used to advertise the Everyday Racism App

was launched in 2011 and focuses on how cultural heritage, beliefs, language and family connections can affect people's sense of self and how they view others, and how this can lead to self-awareness, confusion or prejudice. This is achieved through immersive video narratives and interactive multimedia experiences that were designed to challenge people's preconceived notions about race, identity and belonging.

Towards a new approach to social cohesion

As noted earlier, the existence of multicultural societies has become an indisputable social and demographic fact. Yet, increased diversity is still viewed as a problem rather than a resource. Relations between groups and people within multicultural contexts are subject to change and development which in turn leads to more difference and diversity. The composition of societies will continue to become more diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, religion, lifestyles and language. These changes will challenge historical notions of national identity. It is thus of crucial importance to examine the ways in which intercultural relations are changing within globalized settings, and the ways in which new manifestations of diversity are perceived and governed.

In this context, and in line with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCOs) commitment to approaching 'cultural rights' as human rights, the institute's various activities aim to contribute to a more inclusive public sphere that benefits all through active participation in both social and political processes. The establishment of strategic partnerships with key stakeholders, the adoption of innovative methods, the immediate dissemination and application of research findings through diverse channels and the underlying commitment to participation and empowerment of the more vulnerable among us, constitute the driving forces of the institute's operations.

Such a holistic ethical approach has the potential to minimize — even neutralize — the risk of intercultural and interreligious tensions within increasingly multicultural societies. How to benefit from increased levels of diversity without compromising the possibility of reaching social cohesion and a strong collective sense of unity and belonging is the main global challenge in today's world.[1]

The Diversity: An Educational Advantage Project

The multicultural nature of Australian society is reflected in our schools, and students' diverse cultural backgrounds create new challenges, as well as new opportunities, for school management, curriculum design and teaching practice.

The Diversity: An Educational Advantage Project is focused on equipping schools to ensure the best possible educational outcomes for all students, to foster positive intercultural relations in schools and to enhance community life through strengthening the links between schools and their cultural communities.

In a context of increasing multiculturalism there has, at the same time, been a degree of hardening against the concept itself, focusing on certain cultural groups such as Asians and, in a more complex manner, people of Arabic background. In this uncertain social climate the project began in partnership with a local community association, working with a number of Melbourne public secondary schools with high levels of enrolment of students from Arabic backgrounds. This early intervention work involved linking a cultural diversity facilitator with the schools to facilitate the engagement of the Arabic community with the life of the school.

Then Prof. Mansouri in partnership with both community associations and philanthropic organizations, won Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project scheme funding. This four-year funding, along with contributions from each of the other partners, enabled longitudinal research involving parents, teachers and students in culturally diverse schools. The project involved 297 students, 80 teachers and 44 parents and found that the effects of racism experienced by 15- and 16-year-old Australians of Arab background, particularly since 9/11, have been underestimated. For example, Lebanese students in focus groups outlined difficulties about having multiple identities and how this lent itself to misrecognition as un-Australian:

"I don't like being, you know, Lebbo and English, 'cause like, I'm both, right, and I still get teased, see no one teases me, 'oh you're Aussie, you're half this that', they always come to me 'oh you're Lebbo you're Lebbo', like that, especially Aussies, like they don't know that I'm half, so they always go 'you're Lebbo'."

"Especially the media, 'cause the media, they show us as bad people through the news."

That research underpins the resources described below.

Model of best practice

This concise document is targeted at those leading change and introduces a 'whole-of-school' model of multicultural education that is both multidimensional and transformative. This is a lead document for the project in that it demonstrates the essential link between schools and the social environment and graphically illustrates how the resources introduced integrate and support one another. It provides an overview of the theories behind the model and includes an audit that can be undertaken by schools to gauge where they need to focus attention in implementing it. More specifically, it brings three key approaches together within one framework to help schools manage and positively embrace cultural and linguistic diversity:

• engagement of an in-school cultural diversity facilitator
• active research and evaluation with students, teachers and parents
• development of teaching resources supported by professional development.

In doing so, the model sets out strategies to foster social inclusiveness and reflexive practice on the part of those developing the curriculum, with a view to enhancing educational outcomes.

Parent handbook

This resource is for school staff or other community members looking to engage multicultural communities more closely in the life of the school. A series of sequential modules outline why it matters to engage with the community beyond the school gates and note aspects to be considered in making engagement successful. These modules are thematic and include sessions to help new parents understand the Australian school system as well as providing opportunities for parents to be active players in delivering the curriculum. While the parent handbooks are focused on Arabic communities, these modules introduce a process that could be

Professor Fethi Mansouri with student participants

used effectively in a range of cultural contexts.

For example, it provides a step-by-step guide on how to engage with people from non-English speaking backgrounds with regard to arranging meetings with parents and facilitating their participation in school events. Additionally, the modules emphasize the need for educators to be aware of different expectations from parents regarding education.

Teacher support materials

Our most innovative resource is our online, interactive website, which provides secondary school teachers with insights into the educational experiences of culturally diverse students and how teachers are responding to some of their needs.[2] Through a series of themes — identity and belonging, relationships at school, stereotypes and cultural perceptions, cultural and ethnic tensions, cultural diversity and multiculturalism, and curriculum, school and culture — teachers can access reflective tasks as well as classroom resources.

A good example of the interactive nature of these tasks is the capacity to download snapshot videos and create personalized libraries of materials on each theme that challenges racism and celebrates diversity. Further, in line with the whole-of-school approach each theme can be explored through additional links to material that provides the student, teacher and parent perspective.

Teacher workbook

A printed teacher workbook provides both a supplement to the website and an alternative when Internet access is a problem. While the website provides links to a wide range of resources that teachers can use in their classrooms, the workbook contains a series of curriculum units that have been developed specifically for the project and link directly to Australia curriculum frameworks.

The teacher workbook contains two modules with four units each:
• *Finding my place* seeks to explore identity, cultural diversity, citizenship and cultural stereotypes in the media
• *Community relationships* encompasses the expectations of the self, parents and teachers, how to develop relationships at school, and both school culture and ethnic tensions.

The aim is to help students to engage in research about cultural diversity, consider experiences from diverse backgrounds, recognize and experience difference and, most importantly, identify and explain issues from both 'Aussie' and culturally diverse perspectives with a view to finding shared solutions.

Since the completion of the project, all three components have been combined in a volume titled *Building Bridges: Creating a Culture of Diversity*.[3] Both the project and the book have received praise from ARC and fellow educators.[4]

The project represents an example of transformative research as the book, upon publication, was distributed to all Victorian schools as a practical teaching and learning resource in the area of multicultural education and intercultural understanding, and is listed as a key resource for challenging racism on the Victorian Multicultural Commission website.[5]

The website and *Building Bridges* have also transcended the Australian school sector. They are advertised as a resource by local and international CSOs, such as the Centre for Multicultural Youth[6] and Volunteer Canada[7] amongst others.