

Extending conversations about what is an inclusive curriculum

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Introduction

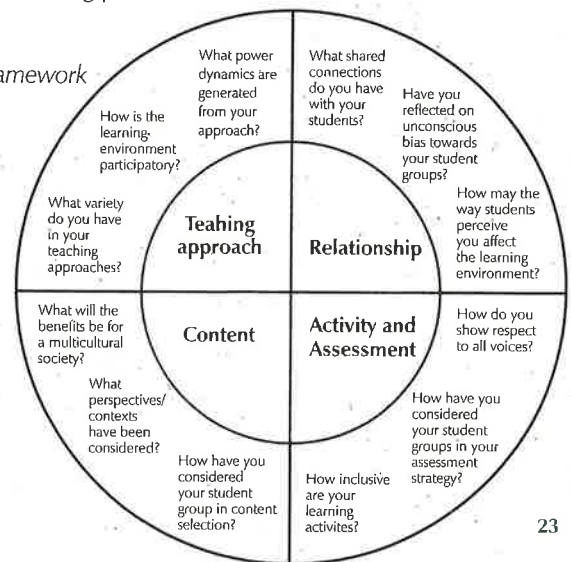
As part of our professional development, it is good practice to continually review the extent to which content, activities, assessment and relationships in the classroom are inclusive. Morgan and Houghton (2011, p. 5) define an inclusive curriculum as '...one that takes into account students' educational, cultural and social background and experience as well as the presence of any physical or sensory impairment and their mental well-being'. By critically considering what is taught, who is teaching, who is being taught, how things are being taught, and why, we can pinpoint how both micro- and macro-changes can be implemented to enhance levels of inclusivity in our higher education classroom. These questions can and should be considered across subject areas to review and develop our university offerings, and enhance the learning experience for students. This should help to address the attainment gap between particular groups of students, for example black and minority ethnic (BAME) and white students (McDuff *et al.*, 2018).

Developing a model for inclusion

The topic of inclusivity continues to receive much critical attention. The subject of decolonising curricula is a growing area of discussion which can be understood as extending conversations concerning inclusive learning and teaching. Extending these discussions involves reflecting on our own

position, perspectives and unconscious bias so that we can consider how these affect our relationships with students, the ways in which we approach teaching and curriculum design, and therefore the student learning experience. The TRAAC (Teaching, Relationships, Activity and Assessment, and Content) model (Figure 1) which is discussed here captures some of the key questions being raised within discussions across the sector (see, for example, Morreira and Lockett (2018), and Sabaratnam (2017)). By bringing together important questions raised within academic debate, the model provides an entry point for deeper reflection on our learning and teaching practices.

Figure 1
The TRAAC Framework
(Tran, 2019)



In the 'Decolonising learning and teaching toolkit', made available online by the School of Oriental and African Studies (2019, p. 8), it is noted that 'Given the increasing diversity of resources we now have for teaching and learning about different subjects, [...] it should be increasingly possible to diversify perspectives and representation within curricula on a range of subjects whilst maintaining core academic principles'. The TRAAC model can be used as a developmental tool to encourage reflection and review of materials and approaches. It is not a tool for criticism, or to be used to point out flaws in a module or programme. Rather, it may shed light on the strengths of a module, the areas for further development, and help pinpoint where consideration for enhancement would most benefit the student learning experience.

Application of the TRAAC model

The TRAAC model was piloted on a core financial accounting module for third-year students on an Accounting and Finance degree. Typically, there are approximately 150 students on the module. Around a third of the class is made up of international students who join the programme as direct-entry students in the final year and who mainly come from institutions in China. The challenges faced by Chinese direct-entry students include language-related issues, culture shock and also 'learning culture shock', as students encounter a more active form of learning than the passive style they have been accustomed to (Warren *et al.*, 2019). Further, the majority of students continuing from the second year are from BAME backgrounds. The task of designing and delivering an inclusive and decolonised curriculum in a subject such as accounting is at first sight challenging because of the nature of the subject. This would also be true of other subjects, mathematics and the natural sciences being other examples, but nevertheless the TRAAC model provides helpful guidance on areas to be considered. Therefore each segment of the TRAAC model was worked through and used to review core aspects of the module.

Teaching approach

Starting point: The teaching approach for the exam-related component is a traditional 2-hour lecture in a large lecture theatre and a 1-hour tutorial. Many students are reluctant to speak in class because if their answers are correct, they may be seen as showing off by their peers. If their answers are incorrect, they worry that they will be seen as struggling to keep up. For similar reasons, students are not necessarily confident to ask questions in front of anyone else.

Questions raised: This front-led teaching style arguably reinforces a hierarchical power dynamic between lecturer and students. This raises questions concerning the lack of opportunities for peer interaction and participation of students, which in turn may affect the learning experience.

However, lecturers on the course need to ensure that core knowledge is communicated clearly so that students are appropriately prepared ahead of their assessments.

Proposed changes: Smaller changes may help to strike a balance between ensuring student understanding while allowing room for increased levels of student engagement. The introduction of short online quizzes provides opportunities to practise calculations. This would help to support the learning

of students with part-time jobs and other commitments, who can learn while 'on the move'. It encourages self-directed learning and is an easy to implement change which might also help students to acquire new digital skills. The simplicity of the online quiz means it would not be onerous to design by the teacher and would be easily supported during the lifetime of the module. It would also be a supportive way of enabling students to practise and receive online feedback on whether their answers are correct or incorrect. The latter would particularly help shyer international students to feel more comfortable at putting forward their answers.

However, encouraging in-class discussion can help to develop students' communication and soft skills. Creating more opportunities for students to work in groups during tutorials can help to introduce a relaxed setting for regular discussion. The introduction of group tasks during tutorials will create more opportunities for student-led discussion and peer learning. This will open up levels of participation and decrease the sense of distance and hierarchy between the lecturer and students, thus enhancing levels of inclusivity through the learning activities.

Relationship

Starting point: The university has a diverse student population and this is reflected in the class. The teaching team on the module comprises three white female lecturers and therefore cannot be said to reflect the entire student population.

Questions raised: Given the high level of student satisfaction on the module and the good academic outcomes, we do not intend to change the team at this point. In an advanced accounting module of this type, the most important thing is to have lecturers who are technically qualified and who have a caring and supportive attitude in their delivery of the module. However, we did question how greater levels of rapport between staff and students could be created, and how this could develop the learning atmosphere.

Proposed changes: The TRAAC model has caused us to pause and reflect on the lack of diversity on the teaching team and how it would be useful for individual members of the team to reflect on any shared connections they may have with their students. Such a task may be a continuing professional development (CPD) activity in itself and help the teaching team to understand how they are being perceived, as well as how they are perceiving their students. Another way in which the team can become more aware of how the relationship between staff and students can affect the learning environment is by reviewing resources on unconscious bias to encourage CPD and critical reflection.

Activity and assessment

Starting point: The module is assessed via an essay and unseen exam. The exam-focused material is technical and aligned with the syllabus required by the accrediting bodies.

Questions raised: It is documented that BAME students are more disadvantaged than white students when exams are the means of assessment (Institute for Policy Studies in Education, and London Metropolitan University, 2011). However, the exam is essential for the module's accreditation which is important to all students and is valuable to them in their future careers. As the exam cannot be replaced, we questioned what

additional support could be offered to students ahead of their final exam.

Proposed changes: Additional classes to review past exam questions are already provided. A formative assessment task on key topics in the form of a marked mid-term mock exam followed by written and verbal feedback is now planned for next year. This will help to better prepare students for not only the type of questions asked, which are structured and written differently to essay questions, but also to help prepare them mentally and emotionally to cope with an exam setting which can be highly stressful. The mid-term mock, like the online quizzes and group discussions, will allow for increased opportunities to receive feedback and forge a dialogue for feedback and responses.

The essay assessment within the module develops students' academic writing skills through a critical analysis of academic literature on a topical current issue within accounting. The essay is not the first coursework submission in the third-year structure of the programme. However, reflecting on the various student groups and the differences in assessments across the various modules, moving forward it will be beneficial to involve the academic skills team specifically to help students with their accounting essay. Consideration of the make-up of the student cohort is taken into account when picking essay themes. For example, we recently asked students to review a particular accounting issue in a developing country of their choice. Students were enthusiastic about being able to choose their country of focus. Students from developing countries were able to draw on their own knowledge within their analysis of the issues. This inclusive approach to the selection of our essay topics will continue so that students are able to reflect their own nationalities, backgrounds, and global and industry perspectives which interest them in each essay.

Content

Starting point: As a technical accounting module with professional accreditation, there is no scope for redesigning the main part of the content which is assessed by an exam. However, the module has a focus on international financial reporting which should make it relevant to all students.

Questions raised: Is the international perspective of the module as outlined in the handbook sufficiently explained so as to engage all students in the module?

Proposed changes: The increasingly globally recognised qualifications with which the module content is aligned will be emphasised more explicitly in next year's handbook. This will increase the relevance of the subject to students and encourage them to aspire to graduate careers within a worldwide accounting profession.

Conclusion

The TRAAC model can be used as a conversation starter, to focus on a particular section, or, more fruitfully, to support a holistic review of a module, as has been done here. The developmental conversations which have arisen from applying the model have led to an honest review of module content and pedagogy. It has underlined what is working well already within the module and suggested ways of further

enhancing provision. This has culminated in some small and more significant changes to the content and delivery of the module. What is key, however, is that the model encourages ongoing reflection, commitment to good practice, and continually seeking ways of forming a more inclusive learning environment and experience for students.

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