Review

An investigation of the cultural diversity competency of future hospitality employees in a multicultural work environments

Lehlohonolo Mixwell Merwe

Department of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa.
E-mail: merwe_ml23@yahoo.com

Although race, age, ethnicity and religious background influence the cultural attitudes of employees in the hospitality industry, it is clear that education has a greater role to play in engendering a spirit of acceptance and respect for people who may differ from us. The rationale behind this mixed design research was to investigate the cultural diversity competency of future hospitality employees in multicultural work environments. Graduates need to be educated in aspects pertaining to cultural diversity and in this regard, the role of the Work Integrated Learning (WIL) mentor as well as lecturers on a university campus, is critical in improving the cultural aptitude of new hospitality employees. There are very few curricular models which lecturers can follow to enable them to enhance the ability of their students to serve in the diverse work environments which exist in the industry. Informal learning opportunities and critical reflection of diversity issues can constitute an invaluable learning foundation for diversity related issues. This article seeks to tackle this question to an extent.

Keyword: Cultural Diversity, Work-Integrated Learning, mentoring.

INTRODUCTION

Global society is transforming at rapid rate and it is necessary for students to understand the broader global picture in which there are many diverse cultures and people who are different to them (Jarvis, 2002). It is also important for today's hospitality managers to be skilled at managing a multi-cultural workforce, which is fully responsive to the diversity of their guests and employees, and other stakeholders of the operation.

The purpose of any cultural diversity training should be to increase the self awareness of students, so that they may treat guests, employees and other hotel stakeholders with the expected courtesy, dignity and respect. Any training in this regard should also sensitize students to the importance of and potential impact of their words and actions on guests. Students should also be able to value the differences in others. Students should be taught to respects all aspects of diversity; including race, ethnicity, gender, religious beliefs, age, sexual orientation and work-life experience amongst others.

What is diversity in the context of this article? "Three key words need to be defined in what diversity should convey in its meaning. They are discrimination, racism and bigotry. These can be described as an exercise of an irrational isolation of people by their class or skin color; a prejudice plus power; and an obsession with one's own race's supremacy undermining others" (Loden and Rosener, 1999). The culture of a diverse organization such as found in a hotel, should be based on a spirit of inclusivity and not simply on representation. Diversity must become a mindset, and should be a process which forms part and parcel of normal business operation. Hospitality employees' cultural fluency is an essential ingredient of success for hospitality companies. Their success and profitability depend, to a great extent, on the effectiveness of their managers and executives who communicate, negotiate, and work with diverse guests, employees, suppliers or government organizations (Brown et al, 2001). Most hospitality employees do not possess a firm grasp of diverse cultures, because they are only familiar with the basics of diversity. This situation often leads to working by trial and error that creates operational inefficiencies, competitive disadvantage and a myriad of lost opportunities. This is especially the case in a transforming society.

According to Loden and Rosener in the book Workforce America, Diversity defined in terms of primary and secondary dimensions includes age, ethnicity, gender, physical ability/qualities, race, and sexual/affectional orientation. These six dimensions serve as interdependent core elements which shape the basic self-image of individuals and which shape their fundamental world view. There are also secondary dimensions that can be changed and which include inter-alia educational background, geographic location, socio-economic status, marital status, religious beliefs, work experience, etc. These dimensions affect our self-esteem and help define

who we are as individuals and they "add complexity to the way we see ourselves and others; they do not usually change our fundamental core identity" (Loden and Rosener, 1999). If we are to prepare students to be educated to be good future employees and model citizens, we cannot ignore the issue of cultural diversity (Lister, 2003).

Diversity management should typically includes the following (Mok, 2002): "The explicit recognition of the strategic importance of employee and customer diversity by top management, ensuring that all human resource management systems (e.g., recruitment, selection, orientation, training and development, rewards systems, communication strategies) are supportive of employee diversity and consistent with applicable legislation (e.g., local labour laws, human rights)".

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

While critical reflection and experience are common conceptions which underlie all types of learning for a transformed society (Merriman et al, 2006), there is a school of thought which suggests that learning is more multi-dimensional than is commonly believed (Taylor, 2005.) Consequently, lecturers who are educating future hospitality employees are increasingly called upon to teach students to deal with issues relating to transformation in the culturally diverse work environments that exist in the hospitality industry. It is necessary to factor in issues of class, race, religion and culture in learning so that students can be presented with a holistic outlook of what to expect in the workplace (Johnson et al, 2006).

Formal and informal learning are important sites for training cultural diversity skills. If hospitality employees are to be culturally sensitive, they are required to fully understand their own preconceived notions, biases, cultural predispositions and assumptions. Schim and co-workers (2006), define cultural competence as the demonstration of knowledge, attitudes as well as behaviours which are based on diverse and relevant cultural experiences. They further state that it is the incorporation of personal cultural diversity experience, awareness and sensitivity towards others into practice. According to Campinha-Bacote (2003), cultural competence is a process by which an employee strives to achieve the ability and availability to effectively work within the cultural context of their client. It is however essential for one to seek to be culturally competent by learning more about diverse cultural ethnic groups and thus one needs to be self-aware of one's biases and preconceived notions. In hospitality, this is a huge task given that many cultures constantly interact. It is especially in the hospitality industry that employees must be comfortable with fellow employees and guests who may exhibit wide-ranging human variations which may

include race, age, religion, ethnicity, language, accents, physical individuality, education, sexual orientation and socio-economic standing.

It is critical that lecturers and mentors in the workplace develop the skills and reflective abilities of their students. In this regard, Purnell's (2002) model of cultural competence used for health practitioners has useful ideas. The model comprises macro aspects such as a global society and moves into micro aspects such as a family and finally the individual. The macro and micro aspects work in synergy within twelve different domains which include the role of the family and communication issues. Cultural competence education and training must be included in the training of lecturers and WIL mentors if students are to develop into accepting human beings, which in a multicultural society is really a non-negotiable aspect.

Research Design

The research strategy utilized by the researcher was a mixed research design which included gathering together both qualitative and quantitative data. The research was carried out in 2009 with hospitality students who had completed or were still busy with WIL. The data collection included a self-reported 30 item survey, interviews and focus groups and was similar to that of Mott and Schmidt of East Carolina University in the USA, who investigated the preparation of culturally competent counseling graduates in multicultural practice environments. A total of 100 students participated of which 68 were female students and 32 were males. The 30 item survey assessed the cultural attitudes and workplace and university experiences of the students as well as pertinent demographic information, hotel and other WIL workplace and university attitudes to cultural diversity, and perceived barriers to the development of cultural skilling in the workplace and at university.

The survey was followed by 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 30 students and a 2 hour focus group that substantiated and confirmed the data that was obtained in the survey. The Qualitative data was examined according to constant comparative analysis methods (Patton, 2002) directly after the semi-structured interviews and the focus group. Data was classified and synthesized until a diffusion point was reached with no new issues arising and in which all data could comfortably fit into categories on hand.

FINDINGS

The research findings included a report by students on how the felt about working in culturally diverse environments as well as their attitudes to employees and guests who were from different cultural backgrounds etc.

They were asked to comment on how well prepared they felt academically to deal with the culturally diverse environment and if their lecturers or mentors had attempted to develop this skill or not and how this was done. As stated above 68 students were female and 32 were male (n=100), with ages ranging from 22-26, with a mean age of 23. Of the sample used, 94 were South Africans (37 White, 42 Black, 6 Coloured, 9 Indian), 2 Black students were from Botswana, 3 Black students were from Mozambique and 1 Black student was from Swaziland. Most of the students emanated from middle-income families and 91 were of the Christian faith, 3 were Moslem and 6 did not state their belief base. Each of the participants was fluent in at least English and one other language.

According to the survey data, most of the students were highly positive towards people from different cultural backgrounds and who were different to them in other ways. This finding was not echoed during the interview and focus group session where it became apparent that there was a bias against people with very different accents and religious backgrounds, and a strong bias towards oriental peoples with whom they felt they had the very least in common. It was interesting to note that at least 85 of the South Africans felt most comfortable with fellow citizens from different races. There was less tolerance between diverse faiths although most students maintained that their religious leaders promoted inter-faith respect and tolerance. There were a number of students who felt that fellow students were sometimes ridiculed due to their country of origin, to the extent of bordering on xenophobia. Some students who emanated from rural backgrounds felt that they were disadvantaged in cultural tolerance as they had very little prior contact with diverse groups back home. In some cases workplaces were described as toxic with regard to cultural diversity acceptance and such workplaces should be reconsidered and efforts should be made to transform them. Lecturers must be trained with a solid and substantive curriculum in which diversity issues are highlighted. The university and workplace should be supportive environments for students.

From an education viewpoint at university, 27% of students felt that they were taught adequately to handle diversity in the workplace by lecturers while 11% stated that their workplace WIL mentor/s has taken time to discuss diversity issues. All students highlighted the fact that not enough had been done during their 2,5 years of study to promote cultural diversity and to prepare them adequately for the workplace during the remaining 0,5 of their academic careers before graduating with a National Diploma in Hospitality Management.

CONCLUSION

The mentoring and lecturing of students plays a vital role in preparing students to face a culturally diverse workplace in the global society. It is thus necessary to examine the context of diversity and analyze lecturer and mentor preparation to handle students in a diverse workplace. More support for diversity should exist. It is essential that more diversity issues be discussed in case studies during lectures at university and that WIL visits with a cultural diversity component in mind be conducted on a more frequent basis than is currently the case. A more reflective and critical perspective is required concerning diversity in the workplace (Mok, 2002). Both lecturers and mentors should not bring their own biases into the classroom and workplace respectively. Workplace mentors should also promote diversity issues. Workshops during the course of an academic year would be useful to create more comfort between students from different backgrounds and races etc and would also serve their future careers in good stead. Cultural attitudes are to a large extent affected by experience and age (Senge, 2006). WIL models should be reconsidered to accommodate cultural diversity as only such education will create empowerment and improve a student's capacity to deal with cultural diversity issues as and when they arise. WIL workplaces must collaborate with universities and also learn to transform themselves in response to the external environment within which they operate and provide meaningful cross-cultural training experiences for students undergoing WIL. Students must also examine the assumptions and beliefs on which their behavior and attitudes are based and they should question themselves. There are many challenges and opportunities for training culturally skilled hospitality industry employees and lecturers and mentors have the power to influence race and other relations in a very positive way (Christou, 2000). Students as future employees must be provided with the tools to understand their role in their everyday work. There training in cultural diversity issues must be an ongoing process. Lecturers and employers must collaborate to create the opportunity to develop a wider range of skills within the workplace for students, including cultural diversity skills so as to enrich the workplace and society in general.

REFERENCES

Baumgartner L (2001). An update on transformational learning. In S. Merriam(Ed). The new update on adult learning theory. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 89, 15-24, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Brown P, Green A, Lauder H (2001). High Skills. Globalization, Competitiveness and Skill Formation. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Campinha-Bacote J (2003). Cultural competence in psychiatric care: A model of practice. Quality Matters (retrieved 2009 from www.transculturalcare.net)

Christou E (2000) Management Competencies for Graduate Trainees of Hospitality and Tourism Programs. Ann. Tourism Res. 27(4):248-260 Cox T (1998). Cultural Diversity in Organizations: Theory, Research and Practice, Berrett-Koehler Publishers.Jarvis P (2002). Globalisation, Citizenship and the Education of Adults in Contemporary European society. Compare. 32(1):5 - 19

Johnson-Bailey J, Alfred M (2006). Transformational teaching and practice of Black women educators. In E.W . Taylor (Ed). Fostering transformative learning in the classroom: Challenges and innovations (49-58). New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 109, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Lister R (2003). Investing in the Citizen-workers of the

.

Future: Transformations in Citizenship and the State under New Labour. Soc. Pol. Adm. 37(5):427-443.

Loden M, Rosener JB (1999). Workforce America: Managing Employee Diversity as a Vital Source, McGraw-Hill.

Merriam S (1998). Qualitative research and case study application in education. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Mok C (2002). Managing diversity in hospitality organizations. In N. D'Annunzio-Green, Maxwell, G.A., & Watson, S. (Eds). Human Resource Management: International Perspectives in Hospitality and Tourism. Continuum, LondonPatton MQ (2002). Qualitative research and evaluation methods (3rd edition), Thousand Oaks, Sage. California.

Schim SM, Doorenbos AZ, Borse NN (2006). Cultural competence among hospice nurses. J. Hospice and Palliative Nurs. 8(5):302-307 Senge P (2006). The Fifth Discipline: The Art and practice of a Learning Organization. Double Day.