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The Culturally Sensitive Curricula Educator Self-Reflection Tool as a step toward curricular transformation

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ABSTRACT

Although there is a growing movement toward creating more equitable learning and teaching practices in higher education, academic developers are still grappling with practical ways to guide academics in inclusive curricular transformation. We briefly characterize the current conversation among academic developers and present and reflect on a new tool, the Culturally Sensitive Curricula Educator Self-Reflection Tool, that extends our earlier research using the Culturally Sensitive Curricula Scales student survey.

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Introduction

Around the world, educators are being challenged to decolonize, diversify, reconcile, or make their curricula more culturally responsive or sensitive (Shahjahan et al., 2022). Although the language of these movements varies by context, they share a common goal of disrupting racialized inequalities that are embedded in learning and teaching practices and the content and processes of knowledge production of disciplines. Academic developers need to be equipped to support this agenda (Behari-Leak & Mokou, 2019).

The need for practical tools

Despite the importance of the decolonisation agenda globally, we have found relatively few practical processes and tools to support inclusive curricular transformation in higher education. Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2023), in their project to develop an inclusive science curriculum, used a two-step process of ‘confidence-shaking’ and ‘confidence-building’ that situated transformation in academics’ acknowledgement of privilege. They concluded that more emphasis needs to be placed on the confidence-building phase. Although Lindstrom et al. (2022) created a ‘Disrupting the Discipline’ interview that helped academics to question taken-for-granted aspects of their discipline, it also seemed to focus more on the ‘confidence-shaking’ phase of transformation.

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Meanwhile, McGowan and Felten (2021) argued for the need to cultivate critical hope in academics engaging in equity work, much like Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2023) confidence-building phase. For McGowan and Felton (2021, p. 474):

a sense of personal agency ('I can change in meaningful ways despite the systems and structures constraining me') plus a vision of possible pathways ('I see specific and purposeful steps I can take') adds up to a powerful sense of hope.

The CSCS and CSC Educator Self-Reflection Tool

The Culturally Sensitive Curricula Scales (CSCS) (Quinlan et al., 2024; Thomas & Quinlan, 2023) and the Culturally Sensitive Curricula (CSC) Educator Self-Reflection Tool (Appendix 1) are designed to promote academics' sense of agency as well as suggest specific steps they can take to enhance their practice. The CSCS conceptualized and operationalized culturally sensitive curricula in higher education with precise examples of such practices in the form of 27 survey items grouped into six dimensions (Diversity Represented, Negative Portrayals, Positive Depictions, Challenge Power, Inclusive Classroom Interactions, and Culturally Sensitive Assessments) (Quinlan et al., 2024; Thomas & Quinlan, 2023).

Academics can use the CSCS to quickly gather perceptions from all their students, allowing them to document strengths and weaknesses in their own practices from students' perspectives, track changes from one cohort to another as they introduce changes, and monitor experience gaps between minoritized and majoritized student groups (Thomas & Quinlan, 2023). Gathering students' views is a vital step in promoting inclusive curricular transformation (Adewumi et al., 2022). Systematically documenting minoritized students' experiences and the cultural insensitivities they perceive through the CSCS helps academics to see the problems to be addressed.

While academics have expressed considerable interest in using the CSCS after hearing results of the CSCS student surveys (Quinlan et al., 2024; Thomas & Quinlan, 2023), they still wanted more explicit guidance in bridging the gap between gathering student survey responses and making changes in their own teaching. In response, we created this Culturally Sensitive Curricula (CSC) Educator Self-Reflection Tool (Appendix 1) derived from the CSCS student survey (Thomas & Quinlan, 2023) and its revision (Quinlan et al., 2024). Academics are instructed to a) self-assess the extent to which their curriculum addresses each of the 27 CSCS-R survey items, b) reflect on their curriculum's strengths and weaknesses for each of the six dimensions of the CSCS, and c) construct an action plan based on their self-assessment. An introduction to the tool sets out the importance and background and suggests using it after awareness-raising activities about privilege and positioning (e.g. Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2023) or in conjunction with the student CSCS survey.

Reflection on using the CSC Educator Self-Reflection Tool in our own teaching

Our collaboration has blended equality, diversity, and inclusion expertise (second author) with academic development expertise (first author) to first define culturally

sensitive curricula and then chart ways to achieve it. These two functions have often been separated in universities but bringing them together is a vital step to curricular transformation.

We have collaborated with several academic developers who have used the tool to reflect on their own teaching on sustained teacher development programmes such as postgraduate certificates in higher education (Thomas & Quinlan, *in press*). These colleagues varied in their academic and personal experience with issues of cultural and racial inclusivity. Each of us has engaged in our own continuous professional development to rethink and redesign our own practices before helping other academics. Like our academic colleagues, we needed to first define the problems with the status quo before we could address them (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2023).

Academic development colleagues' experiences with the tool illustrate four broad pathways to action at a module (subject or course) level: (1) revising the canon through strategic substitutions, (2) backward design, (3) reframing a module through a wider lens, and (4) revising student evaluations of teaching to include attention to cultural sensitivity. We provide a brief example of each here (see Thomas & Quinlan, *in press*, for more elaborated case studies) before drawing out lessons for working with academics in the next section.

By rating every item on their reading list using the CSC Educator Self-Reflection Tool, one colleague teaching an introduction to learning and teaching in higher education noticed weaknesses on the 'Diversity Represented' dimension. For example, canonical readings were primarily written by White Anglo-European authors. This exercise prompted a concerted search for learning theories that draw on indigenous and other perspectives, leading to key substitutions when revising the reading list. In doing so, the example of Cuenca-Carlino et al. (2023) redefinition of inclusive teaching excellence provided inspiration.

Another colleague using the tool noticed a weakness in the 'Culturally Sensitive Assessments' dimension, so they started by changing their assessment. They invited learners to do a project that analysed a topic as it is addressed in a country of their choice. They then engaged in backward design to change teaching materials and resources to support learners in analysing this and other shared issues from different national and cultural perspectives. This colleague noted substantial improvements in both learners' engagement with the assignment and cultural awareness demonstrated through the assignment.

The first author, teaching a module on contextualising learning and teaching in higher education that historically focused on the national policy context, realized that it was necessary to shift the conceptual framing of the module to contextualize it internationally. Doing so allowed a deeper engagement with the 'Challenge Power' dimension of the CSCS, invited a new unit on educating for sustainable development, and validated the perspectives and knowledge of an international cohort of learners.

Two of us have also experimented with ways to informally incorporate the dimensions of the CSCS into module evaluation forms. The CSCS itself is a student survey that contains a set of 27 items which can be administered either alongside or as part of a full module evaluation. Rather than use the full CSCS 27-item instrument (Quinlan et al., 2024), we have taught about these issues and then asked participants to provide feedback

at the level of the six dimensions. Integrating CSCS dimensions or items into the evaluation of teaching is a step toward embedding the CSCS dimensions into usual university quality assurance processes. There may be other ways to mainstream and normalize cultural sensitivity in the overall institutional culture by making it part of business-as-usual curricular activities, such as program review or revalidation.

Revising learning objectives also would be a natural starting point for curricular redesign but has been constrained by external program accreditation requirements. Amongst academics we work with, external accreditation and regulatory requirements are often cited as a barrier, though our examples show how changes can still be achieved. Advance HE's newly revised Professional Standards Framework (Advance HE, 2023) strengthens the emphasis on inclusivity, which may stimulate reform in academic development programs during future accreditation cycles. As more accreditation standards incorporate elements of cultural sensitivity, they will be a lever for change, increasing demand for tools to support this kind of curricular transformation.

Reflection on using the CSC Educator Self-Reflection Tool with participant-colleagues

The examples above suggest that once areas for improvement are identified through the CSC Educator Self-Reflection Tool, different approaches to curriculum development can be used, depending, in part, on the issues to be addressed. Thus, it may be helpful to explicitly link the tool to a unit or resource on curricular design models and approaches to support academics in constructing appropriate action plans.

Just as we found an example in our field (Cuenca-Carlino et al., 2023) helpful, our colleagues in other disciplines may also appreciate discipline-specific examples to help them understand how the principles can be implemented in their fields. Thus, we are beginning to build a collection of case examples from a variety of disciplines as further resources to support reflection and action. One colleague is also gathering unpublished exemplars produced by our participant-colleagues as part of a specialized module on inclusive curriculum.

Although the tool was designed for individual reflection, colleagues benefit from discussing their responses. Given participants' busy schedules, it can be helpful to allow time to complete it during a class session before practice-sharing in small groups.

To the extent that this type of curricular transformation lies in rethinking disciplines (Lindstrom et al., 2022), completing the self-reflection tool could be used across a whole program team, perhaps embedded into program review or re-accreditation processes. Teams can be supported to use discussions arising from the tool to generate a one-, two-, or three-year action plan at a program level, with annual follow-ups. The second author is beginning such a process across a whole institution.

Conclusion

This tool has the advantage of being paired with a survey in which academics can compare their own perceptions with that of minoritized students, strengthening student voice in curricular reform (Quinlan et al., 2024; Thomas & Quinlan, 2023, *in press*). We realize, though, that this tool is just one step in a much bigger transformation process that

must involve deep reflection on the disciplinary or meso level (Lindstrom et al., 2022) and the macro level of institutions and systems (Behari-Leak & Mokou, 2019). Nonetheless, this new CSC Educator Self-Reflection Tool supports academics in hopeful action (McGowan & Felton, 2021) on a micro level to undertake inclusive curricular transformation. Coupled with discipline-specific examples and discussions amongst disciplinary peers, we can take first steps toward further changes at a meso level. By embedding dimensions of the CSCS into quality assurance processes such as teaching evaluations and program reviews, we may also effect institutional change.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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