

Strengthening cultural awareness in the classroom: A case in point

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In an era where education has permeated through all corners of the world, teaching and learning has taken on a new dimension. Teachers no longer just impart knowledge nor students just learn what is being imparted. The classroom has become a global village with students from different parts of the world. Teachers do not always view this context as an excellent opportunity for strengthening cultural awareness among students, beyond the superficial level of political correctness. Recently, whilst involved in a classroom discussion about community building, I found myself in a situation where racial tensions escalated among the students with indications of the situation becoming volatile. As the students were about to start their rural community practice, the teaching team decided that a tutorial topic such as “Rebuilding East Timor” would be appropriate. The discussion started off well enough with students identifying various concepts that encompassed community building. Suddenly, however, I noticed that a group of students began to express angrily their disapproval of Australia’s involvement in going into East Timor. This created a counter reaction from another group of students and the situation became explosive with harsh phrases being flung across the classroom between the students. I sensed that cultural differences and values were underpinning the students’ negative discourse. I became aware that what was occurring had the potential to turn into something far worse. I could have stopped the session and redirected the students to work on another topic. Instead, I chose to take the lead and guide the debate towards a positive outcome. I commenced a discussion based on the issues at hand that promoted cultural awareness. This settled the students. The aim of this paper is to use the above experience as a case in

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