Problematising »Cultural Competence« in the Digital Environment

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1. Introduction

Terminology can be a challenge, whether in public or academic discourse. It can test political correctness, be opaque as an academic construct, or become embedded as some cute new morphing meme. Creative »turns of phrase« emerge daily, often with roots in popular culture and the hyper-networked worlds of social media. But just as such expressions might enrichen culture, they can also hinder effective communication. At the interface of intercultural understanding, choice of terminology can be particularly problematic. Terms can be – and routinely are – appropriated because they suddenly appear within social discourse, seem useful and then get used within diverse contexts beyond their origins. Because of this, concepts and their associated terms and definitions are not always semantically aligned within a language, let alone in translation. And so, it is not so difficult to make a linguistic faux pas in cross-cultural communication. This chapter focuses on this terminology problem in presenting a review of »cultural competence« in the research literature, particularly that literature associated with intercultural understanding. This term is problematised because it can imply elitist perspectives or be interpreted too narrowly. To sharpen the focus, this problematic is situated within the context of the evolving digital environment – the medium through which teaching and learning in the twenty first century is increasingly utilised.

2. Terminology and Public Discourse

Terminology can be the source of protracted debate and a problem that is more than just »academic«. For example, prominent in the era of »post-truth« has been public criticism of news media reporting with widespread usage of terms such as *fake news* by politicians to dismiss any news that they disagree with or contradicts their political messaging (Luo, Hancock, & Markowitz, 2022). Of course, prior to this situation the media has had a long history of sensationalising headlines to capture attention, so the politicians are not entirely to blame. Moreover, concentration of media ownership is a well-known source of political bias (Grossman, Margalit, & Mitts, 2022). The net result is mistrust of the media, making it difficult for the public to distinguish credible and unreliable sources of information (Cinelli, et al., 2021; Luo, Hancock, & Markowitz, 2022; Mari, et al., 2022). The contemporary context is further complicated by the proliferation of social media echo chambers where terms like »conspiracy theory« are used to denigrate or marginalize certain ideas or commentary, sidelining informed debate that is in the public interest (Cinelli, et al., 2021). Alongside these developments has been a broader decline in trust of public institutions and authorities, such as financial institutions, scientific agencies, churches, and governments (Lovari, 2020; Ognyanova, Lazer, Robertson, & Wilson, 2020). Consequently, public discourse in the contemporary global environment has become both polarized and tribalized, complicating the appreciation of both cultural difference and commonality (Congdon, 2022; Funkhouser, 2022). Thus, while the presence of terms like *global citizenship* in school curricula may signal development of intercultural skills as an essential »21st century skill«, the emerging reality suggests a trend toward »de-globalisation« and a retreat from the global perspectives (Schugurensky & Wolhuter, 2020; Williamson, 2021).

There are many more prominent examples of terminology adopted within public discourse that is »catchy« yet also ambiguous because of utility. The term »smart« is a good example. Since the arrival of the smartphone the idea of smart has been adopted in all kinds of contexts, describing the capabilities of the latest models of pens, fridges, cars, as well as »futureproofing« of urban design in smart cities (Daudkhane, 2017; Dron, 2018; Hoel & Mason, 2018; Pilon & Brouard, 2022). Recognising the pivotal role of terminology, international standards-setting organisations such as the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) routinely pay a lot of attention to it, whatever the domain of practice. For example, some terms such as *blockchain* or *big data* are

relatively easy to define because they have technically precise semantic boundaries; others, such as *open* (as in open source, open access, open science, and open educational practices), have rich semantics and hence broad utility.

In the more select realms of academic discourse, concepts such as decolonization and cultural competence are often implicated within the broader public discourse of diversity, inclusion, and equity. While these terms are in widespread usage in academic contexts they are also contested (Arribas Lozano, 2018). Moreover, generalisations about people based on race is racist – »white educators mobilize and weaponize cultural competency discourses to justify blatant racism as well as protect themselves against allegations of the same this problem« (Ray & Davis, 2021). In the public domain, such terms are not easily adopted – arguably, because they can convey an elitist or in-crowd knowledge of the correct usage. The context of public policy discourse, intercultural development is often focused on things like peacebuilding, problem solving and conflict resolution. Within this broader context, then, choices are made concerning terminology alternatives.

In response to such terminology challenges, there has been a noticeable shift in policy relevant to the Australian education sector in recent years where a commitment to addressing systemic inequities is also evident. For example, the expression »cultural responsiveness« is now explicit within the Australian Northern Territory Government's *Education Strategy 2021–2025* and embedded within guidelines developed by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2022):

> The power of education to impact change cannot be overstated. For many, education is the means through which dreams and aspirations are realised. For others, though, education is something to be endured for little or no gain. The legacy of colonisation has undermined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' access to their cultures, identities, histories, and languages. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have not had access to a complete, relevant, and responsive education. Being an institution of the dominant or mainstream culture, Australian education systems reflect the values, norms and world views of that culture. Consequently, inequitable education outcomes have often been viewed as deficiencies or failures on the part of the student, rather than a failure of our systems. (AITSL, 2022)

The AITSL »Intercultural Development Continuum« begins with a recognition of »intercultural destructiveness« where »attitudes, policies and practices that are destructive to identities, values and practices«. Such recognition is not easily enacted and is complicated by the next stage described as »intercultural blindness … the belief that all peoples have the same needs, priorities and values and that those who are different are segregated for their own good« (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2022). Moving on from these starting points enables pathways that extend through stages of intercultural awareness, competence, responsiveness and finally »intercultural sustainability«. In the practical context of teacher workshops focused on this, however, the nuancing is not universally appreciated nor is there easy consensus. With destructiveness and blindness explicit, coming to terms with such things can be emotional and shameful, linked to traumatic history. Arguably, workplace discussions around cultural development are often lacking in compassion. Anecdotally, improving intercultural skills can feel like either a compliance issue or treated as a simple matter of providing training around key concepts. Importantly, the intercultural interface is also about dialog, interpersonal relationships, self-awareness and personal growth. When confronted honestly and authentically, it can be tender transformation space with its subconscious shadows and sensitive tendrils needy of human connection.

3. Culture and Cultural Competence

Most literate people have a working understanding of what culture is and there are countless definitions that can be sourced defining it in terms of beliefs, values, attitudes, protocols, symbols, artefacts, or traditions associated with a particular group of people – and the relationship between religion and secular society also provides plenty of influence. Often, all these various aspects combine to invoke a sense of difference. But what may be acceptable within one culture may be perceived as oppressive in another – for example, the degree to which women's clothing may be considered revealing or not. At the intercultural interface it is easy to make a *faux pas* in ordinary daily activities such as making direct eye contact or signalling one is okay using a hand gesture. Importantly, culture is something that is learned, shared, and dynamic – it changes over time. In the field of intercultural studies several constructs can distinguish cultures according to the depth of »power distance« (hierarchy), individual versus collective values, degree of masculinity, »un-

certainty avoidance«, perspectives on long-term conventions, and freedom versus restraint (Hofstede, 2001). While such classifications can be useful to consider they can also mask deeper complexity and perpetuate another problem – »othering«, amplifying difference over commonality (Canales, 2000; Reid, 2017). Social problems are also very much bound up in the »other«. The rise of conspiracy theories highlights this, particularly through the medium of social media. Moreover, can we really understand another culture through studying the conventions and protocols associated with it? Will training in the other group's protocols be sufficient for gaining »cultural competence«?

Like many words in English, »culture« has versatility and can be used meaningfully across a variety of contexts. For example, it may be used to refer to the visual and performing arts, the protocols for doing things within organisations, or the practices associated with a particular ethnic group (Balcazar, Suarez-Balcazar, & Taylor-Ritzler, 2009; Evans, et al., 2012). Where shared meaning is concerned, however, ambiguity often creeps in, and so additional qualification is used to provide clarity – as in »organisational culture« or »Chinese culture«. The flipside, however, is when the qualification brings ambiguity, and this notoriously happens in the context of intercultural communication. »Cultural competence« is a prime example and is prominent in »multicultural social work discourse« (Nadan, 2017). While sometimes used to describe proficiency in effectively communicating and interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds it is also commonly used to describe fundamental protocols and practices that an individual must learn about a specific cultural group. And, while the intention of gaining cultural competence may be to address underlying power imbalances and social inequalities, the term itself also can exacerbate the very »us and them« problem it aims to address because it implies the presence of insiders and outsiders. A deeper problem is that much of the framing around cultural competency of from a place of »whiteness« (Ray & Davis, 2021). But while it might make some sense to respectfully learn about the protocols for engagement with a remote First Nations community – and refer to that as the acquisition of cultural competence – it makes less sense in the converse, when suggesting someone might become a culturally competent Australian or a culturally competent Indonesian. Why does such a juxtaposition reveal conceptual dissonance? Some may argue it is because the one of the co-authors (Jon) who articulated the quandary has not questioned his own cultural position enough. But another argument is that flipping the context exposes the absurdity of the construct, and probably a false assumption cultural homogeneity in nation states.

»Cultural competence« also sits within a larger corpus of terminology aligned with inclusion and diversity that communicates politically correct overtones, although is also sometimes at odds with it (Chun & Evans, 2016, p. 8). Thus, similar expressions such as »cultural sensitivity« and »cultural humility« are sometimes used to describe an individual's ability to have awareness and respect for cultural differences (Botelho & Lima, 2020; Danso, 2018). The notion of humility is also inferred in the AITSL continuum where cultural responsiveness describes a poignant stage where people become vulnerable and are keenly aware of how hard these spaces can be. The resulting actions and relationships are then felt by all involved as authentic.

It is somewhat ironic, however, that »cultural competence« is still widely used when the academic literature focused on it has been debating its appropriateness for well over a decade (Botelho & Lima, 2020; Burgess, 2019; Chun & Evans, 2016; Kumagai & Lypson, 2009; Ray & Davis, 2021). It is not as if alternatives have not been proposed. Burgess (2019), for example, suggests that in the context of teacher professional development it would be preferable to focus more on »develop[ing] *critical reflexivity* in the ongoing construction of a pedagogical cultural identity«. For Chun and Evans (2016) the notion of »diversity competence« is preferable while for Kumagai and Lypson (2009) the foregrounding of »competence« in multicultural education blurs the more important role of »fostering critical awareness—a critical consciousness—of the self, others, and the world«. Why should competence matter at all? For us, the implied meaning is all about dialogic skills that are needed to negotiate the complexities of social interaction. If we embrace some »cultural humility« then we are opening our potentially wrong assumptions and views to others when we engage with them (Branson, 2020; Hockett, Samek & Headley, 2012; Reid, 2017).

At our university in the Northern Territory of Australia the context is explicitly remote and regional, and it is no surprise that there is a strong focus on partnering with First Nations people in our programs. In addition, a large international student cohort originating from over 60 countries provides an imperative for intercultural engagement. In recent years there has been a subtle shift to referring to »cultural competences« – that is, the plural form. This small change makes a significant difference because it infers diversity in the message more than ability.

4. Terminology and Technology Enhanced Learning

Likewise, in the fast-moving field of technology enhanced learning (TEL), there exists an expanding scope of terminology that is often adopted in very different ways and this can contribute to confusion within public discourse. The cluster of terms associated with »distance education« in the last three decades underscores this: *computer-based training, computer mediated communication, computer-supported collaborative learning, online learning, e-learning, digital learning, mobile learning,* and *technology enhanced learning* to name a few. A prominent contemporary example is the term »artificial intelligence« (AI). While this can refer to a branch of computer science that is approximately 70 years old, AI is now commonly used to describe entities such as robots (»an AI«) as well as a field of research and innovation (Mason, Peoples, & Lee, 2020). Arguably, AI also represents convenient shorthand for the widely adopted term »smart« (as in smart phones, smart cars, and smart cities) – the mainstream access to ChatGPT during 2023 demonstrated very quickly that a new era of »smart technology« adoption using conversational agents is underway (Graesser & Forsyth, 2014; Li, Xing & Leite, 2022).

AI is also used in a broader sense to describe a wide range of technologies, from simple algorithms to advanced systems that can perform tasks that typically require human intelligence, such as natural language processing and image recognition. Not long ago, computer-based speech recognition was understood to be a sub-field of AI. But because AI is often used to describe such a wide range of technologies, the notion of the associated »intelligence« or capabilities is up for debate – just because a machine can compute does not necessarily make it »intelligent« (Verhulst, et al., 2021). Within the field of AI there are associated terms like »deep learning«, »machine learning«, and »computational intelligence« which are used to describe a diversity of algorithms and techniques, including what is also used within the field as »supervised« and »unsupervised« learning. As with any discipline, it takes time to gain familiarity with foundational categories and concepts.

Putting aside the academic debate as to whether «data is« or »data are« (arguably, both are now acceptable for people who appreciate the evolution of language), another example of confusing terminology is »big data«. Used to describe the large amounts of data generated by an expanding number of data points in our daily lives resulting from digital technologies supporting activities such as public transport usage or shopping in the supermarket (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015). Such data is routinely collected by both commercial organi-

zations and individuals for analysis and monetization. However, the notion of »bigness« can be misleading because the datasets are not necessarily big in size but more typically in complexity or volume. In the broader domain of digital technology innovation terms such as »zero trust« have been coined to mean exactly the opposite to what most people would naturally assume – a robust layer of digital security that ensure trust!

When considering the specific TEL context of teacher education then we can also find an opportunity to connect the foregoing discussion on cultural humility to the evolving digital environment:

> A key goal of teacher education, therefore, is to prepare graduates to know that their job is predicated on a *lack* of knowledge, and that as digital global communications bring increasingly rapid cultural hybridity, cosmopolitanism and fallout from historical policy inequity, they will continually need to learn, over and over again, about their students' cultural and community ways of knowing, doing and thinking. (Reid, 2017, p. 210)

5. The Digital Environment

Depending on when the beginnings of the so-called digital revolution are conceived, various terms have been coined to describe the abilities and skills required to engage successfully with digital technology. Often, »literacy« is included as a qualifier as in *information literacy, computer literacy, ICT literacy, media literacy, digital literacy, data literacy*, etc. Literacy in this list could easily be replaced by »skills« to communicate much the same meaning. Related terminology also includes *computer expertise, digital fluency,* and *digital competence*, where knowledge, skills and attitudes might also be implied (Miller & Bartlett, 2012). In the context of lifelong learning in the 21st century there are several other considerations – for example, someone may be skilled at using social media but not be information literate or vice versa; someone may have developed excellent search skills but have no understanding of information provenance or cyber safety; or someone with physical disabilities may have developed extraordinary facility with a brain-computer interface for navigating the web but have no other digital technology skills. The popularised notion »digital natives« and »digital immigrants« have also perpetrated false generalisation of digital competence (Prensky, 2001). Many so-called digital natives have little knowledge

or understanding of the digital environment beyond a narrow scope of smartphone usage.

In a specific context of using digital technology for written academic argumentation, digital competence might refer to effective use of digital tools and resources to research, draft, revise, and publish written arguments (Arroyo, Fernández-Lancho & Martínez, 2021). But how is such competence conceived if the individual is also using AI text generators and paraphrasing tools? Such questions emerge if we are thinking critically. And we need to be asking more and more questions about our interactions *with and within* the digital environment. We have long passed that time when digital technology is accurately portrayed as »just a tool« (Gates, 1995; Zuboff, 2015). We are also immersed within an environment of digital culture, digital commerce, and digital learning within a growing context of the monetization of big data, surveillance, and the scaling up of cyber security threats worldwide.

6. Nuancing the Digital Divide

Prominent within the literature focused on engaging with digital technology is the notion of the »digital divide« (Coleman, 2021; Cruz-Jesus, Vicente, Bacao, & Oliveira, 2016). Basically, it refers to a disparity gap – between those who have access to digital technologies and those who do not. The concept emerged shortly after the invention of the world wide web though the underlying concept of social inequality dates back much further into history (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the digital divide with significant consequences for education, healthcare, and daily life (Mason, Khan, & Badar, 2021; Norman, et al., 2022). Prior to the pandemic several global initiatives had promised solutions, often led by innovations with technology. The evidence is, however, that while this divide has widened significantly due to the pandemic, many technology-led solutions to the problem have not yet proved to be sustainable due to overlooking the importance of local contexts (Badar & Mason, 2020). Moreover, in responding to this problem and ensuring that all individuals have access to the opportunities provided by digital technologies other dimensions to the »divide« have emerged.

One of us has a role as a teacher in a remote a Northern Territory Indigenous community. Anecdotally, another form of digital divide is evident in such a setting where typically digital technology is used as a conduit for social capi-

tal and entertainment, as in the sharing photos and movies, more than a platform for information seeking or learning. The following is a rendering of a real-world dialog that took place in 2022 in a remote community within the Northern Territory of Australia…

> It had been a busy day thus far dealing with students and making some phone calls to organise logistics for an upcoming event. At last, my office was quiet – here was a chance to get some uninterrupted time to plough through some report writing…. Or so I thought!
>
> »Chris, Chris, are you there? Are you busy wawa (brother)?«
>
> I hesitate, stare at my computer as it contemplates opening the excel spreadsheet file that I had clicked to open.
>
> »I am yapa (sister), why?« I ask with a sigh, knowing full well that my yapa has brought her daughter to me once again to attempt to gain access to her MyGov account so we could complete her overdue tax returns from previous years.
>
> »I've brought Phyllis so you can help her with her government djora (paperwork)« says my yapa.
>
> Aaagghh I'm thinking, but already I find myself saying »Okay yapa, but we need to make it quick. I have other work to do and you really should make a time to come and …« My words trail off.
>
> I recognize the immediacy of this situation with people living in the now. I also recognize but don't understand the digital divide that impacts on remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. Probably elsewhere too. So, I impatiently try to regain my patience and composure. After all, I'm here to help. Phyllis hands me her papers. An overdue notice from the tax department and another scrap piece of paper with some codes – hopefully correct passwords to gain access to her MyGov account. But I soon realise these passwords mean nothing. We get nowhere. Not sure of the spelling of her username, I try a variety of different ways of spelling her name. No luck.
>
> We then start trying adding her Yolngu name, no luck; her totem, no luck; her skin name, no luck. I frustratingly state that you need to be

consistent with which name you use and its spelling for official documents and databases. For Yolngu who don't own names like we do, my derision makes no sense.

Eventually, through pure luck I try swapping a letter ›O‹ for a zero and yes! We have cracked the username. Now for the password. Forgotten. Hit the »forgot password« button. The website asks me do I want to send a reset link to a mobile phone number ending in 345 or to Phyllis's email?

»Is that your phone number?« I ask Phyllis.

»›No‹ she says. ›That's an old one‹«.

»What about your email?«

»I don't know the password… I don't know how to use email. You have a look«. Phyllis passes me the phone. It's an android and I am used to an iPhone. It takes me a while to remember the logic. I find the email account. It's open, with dozens of unopened emails. But we don't know the password. Useless. Then I ask if she has another phone. She says no but has another SIM card in her purse. I rejoice and suggest we give that a try. Before Phyllis swaps SIM cards, she checks here Facebook and Instagram feeds. Her phone has been pinging with notifications from the two social media platforms. She changes SIM cards. We try to see if this is linked to her MyGov account. It's not. The phone pings again and again. This time it is for notifications for Facebook, Instagram and TikTok to this other SIM. Phyllis checks these accounts and enjoys a few moments of catching up on family and friend news.

»Do you have any other number?« I ask. She thinks long and hard whilst checking her social media feeds.

»Maybe another SIM card«. She thinks, before pulling FIVE more SIM cards from her wallet! I stare in disbelief while she changes SIM cards in the phone. After four attempts – Bingo! We have a matching number that we can now receive a notification to change the password on Phyllis's MyGov login. I am feeling like we are finally making progress. Phyllis asks me to download the MyGov app on to her phone as she does not have a computer to easily access. I think that is a great idea. She hands me her phone again and this time I notice a game is open and YouTube is playing a video in the background. I close these down to go to the homepage – the homepage wallpaper image is of some men in full customary dress. I install

the MyGov app and commence linking the app to her existing account… until we get to the stage of officiating her identification.

Phyllis has her birth certificate. Perfect! Once again, she asks me to enter the information. She does not know what to do. I begin entering her name. I try every conceivable combination of names and their spellings, but the database will not recognize her account to link them together. Ninety-five minutes since they walked into my office, I tell them I have another meeting to go to and Phyllis says okay we can come back tomorrow morning.

I say »Yes, come at 0830 and I will set aside an hour to try and work this out«.

She agrees and leaves, eyes on her phone as it pings merrily away notifying her of her social media updates on a SIM that I have no idea about.

Phyllis didn't show up the following day.

7. Conclusion

Public debate is often the place where new terminology emerges. Initially associated with a specific context, some of it has academic origins, some not. But terminology is appropriated and repurposed. It also gets highly politicised (e.g., »woke« and »fake news«). Some terms are counter-intuitive, such as »populism« – for many people, democracy should be about popular choice, yet this term now carries more cynical connotations that politicians exploit to pivot »the people« against a perceived »establishment« or »elite«. But because many words in English have high utility, combining them into phrases such as »cultural competence« can be problematic. They become even more so when contextualised by the context of the evolving digital environment, a domain that is littered with hybrid tech-speak. This chapter has teased out some of the issues and identified alternative terminology – »intercultural responsiveness« points to where we should head. For us, the way forward is in dialog. This is a space of discovery where words still matter, but they also yield to the spaces in between where listening, reflection, and consideration of other perspectives are valued.

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