Mixing, learning and working together

The information on these pages has been developed as part of the Teaching International Students project.
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1. Introduction

Most students do not take advantage of the opportunities presented by diverse campuses and classrooms though, of course, some do. A minority will take it upon themselves to develop friendships, broaden their perspectives and learn skills suitable for a diverse and globalised world. This behaviour is probably easier in cohorts where no one group predominates or where the overall level of diversity is high.

A majority of students, when left to their own devices, are likely to work with students they perceive as culturally similar to themselves. The result for some, especially for international students, is disappointment that they have not had more opportunities to mix with and make friends with local students. International students do appreciate the rich mix of other nationalities they can meet by travelling to the UK, helping them feel that they have had some of the benefits of international travel. But close links between UK and international students are likely to be rare or absent for many.

Students can be encouraged or manoeuvred to move outside their personal comfort zone. Persuading students to ‘mix’ across national, cultural and language differences usually requires strategic, proactive interventions by teachers, institutions and curriculum developers. In cohorts where a significant proportion of students share a similar cultural or language background, these issues can be especially problematic.

2. The main issues: getting started

The Vice Chancellor of Liverpool Hope University, writing in the preface of the Global University writes: “Thankfully, it is becoming increasingly clear to us that the main benefits of the globalisation of higher education are not financial (as valuable as that may be) but intellectual and cultural. The coming together of people from different parts of the world to study has the potential to form creative global communities that learn to interact and collaborate in new and previously incomprehensible ways. Such is the dynamism of life in the ‘global village’.” (Shiel and McKenzie, 2008)

Students' lived experiences do not generally support rhetoric about ‘global villages’. The further reading section includes some of the many studies which explore students' experiences in campuses and classrooms. These show ‘silos’ to be a more apt metaphor, each one containing those from the same country or region of the world and/ or those speaking a similar language. A one year study confirmed students do self-select into cultural ‘silos’ but that a small number of students act as bridges between groups or make deliberate attempts to cross or ignore cultural boundaries. (Brown, 2008)

This pattern of interaction is hardly surprising. Cross-cultural work, conducted in a language where everyone is not equally comfortable, requires resilience, effort and additional time. Local students are generally unconvinced by claims about future improvements in their employability if they work in diverse teams when the here-and-now demands of work, study and other commitments are so pressing. Many describe getting to know and work with others as time wasted, or as a threat to good grades, or both.

The solution will never be straightforward but lies in increasing the number of ways in which (all) students can be encouraged to interact beyond their personal ‘comfort zone’ while at the same time decreasing the ‘threat’ (perceived or real). If you force students to interact without appropriate support, training and motivation, you risk fostering less rather than more mutual understanding and respect (Summers & Volet, 2008). Staff with many different roles can encourage and/or manoeuvre students into mixing and working together.

Successful examples of ‘mixing’ have arisen through:

- Teachers redesigning group-based coursework. Diverse groups attempting assessed tasks will need to develop the necessary skills for doing so effectively. Tasks should require co-operation and collaboration
and students should be well-supported when tackling these tasks and as and when difficulties and conflicts arise.

- Teachers making clear to their students that mixing with other students is a necessary and normal part of their study. This can be done by using very simple strategies such as regularly asking (all) students to move and sit next to someone they have previously never spoken to or worked with so that they get a diverse range of ideas and views.

- Student support specialists and departmental organisers creating additional opportunities for interaction such as student study groups, language classes, proof-reading partnerships, or ‘buddies’ or task groups.

- Induction activities that provide opportunities for international students to mix with local students, not just other international students (although international students often report the importance of co-national friends and networks).

- Programme designers building closer alignment between the formal and informal curriculum.

- Staff developers assisting teaching staff to develop skills and attitudes necessary for teaching and supporting cross-cultural interactions and encouraging these amongst students and their peers.

By working together, you can shift the campus and classroom environment towards one that foregrounds interaction, communication and sharing of knowledge.

3. Possible solutions: suggestions for action

3.1 Closer alignment of the formal and informal curriculum

Programme-level planning can build in early, low-risk encounters, perhaps in induction events or non-assessed group tasks. Where student cohorts remain relatively stable, early modules or learning units could devote time to students getting to know each other in structured ways. In disciplines where content is applied and contextualised, the students’ own language or national / cultural backgrounds could provide an early arena for its exploration. In more fact-based and empirical disciplines, programmes could use experiential learning methods like simulations, team-based problem solving and even trips and excursions to help students make connections. The purpose is to create a means for students to spend time together, interact in meaningful and authentic ways, and to have the chance to reflect upon and learn from the encounter. To that end, experiences and events need to explicitly include all students, therefore avoiding unstructured or alcohol-based social events and planning in experiences which are sensitive to students’ time or family constraints. Whilst many early events have more to do with cultural ‘tourism’ than with more meaningful exchanges, they can provide a starting place. Students are more likely to engage in subsequent, more challenging encounters if they can see how their effort will be worthwhile. This usually means finding a way that the experiences can be recorded, reflected upon, and used for later learning.

The formal curriculum might link with the informal curriculum though activities such as mentoring, work, sports, or volunteering. Links might include naming, recognising and reporting on informal curricula activities, perhaps through asking students to use reflective instruments like personal development logs, personal portfolios or by recognising informal curricular achievements through awards and prizes. Because students who are unfamiliar with such activities are less likely to engage in them, some groups such as international students might need targeted help and support to get started.

See also the ‘Internationalising the curriculum’ section of this resource bank
3.2 Redesign group based coursework to support and encourage ‘mixing’

Generic recommendations about group work involving culturally diverse students cover issues of:

- Membership
- Task design
- Assessment
- Managing group process, especially conflict

Several additional factors might specifically encourage students to use group-based experiences to enhance their cross cultural skills and to develop a deeper appreciation of other students’ perspectives and experiences. If you are using group activities to these ends, you need to consider:

- **How long you wish the group to go on meeting and working together.** In general, students will need many weeks and some would argue up to six months of interaction to develop effective and positive interactions (Leask, 2009). This means the work is unlikely to be completed and assessed in a single module or learning unit and therefore needs programme-level planning.

- **How you intend the students to learn specific cross-cultural skills.** Skills teaching can be distributed across a programme as relevant to specific modules or be allocated to a particular context or specialist teacher. Students can learn the skills by reflection, modelling, theoretical texts, or specialist workshops – whatever vehicle is chosen, the students need to be able to name, practice and reflect upon their learning before being asked to apply the skills in assessed work where the consequence of unskilful use is lower grades. Often, freeing students up to try out cross-cultural skills means shifting the focus for assessment from the group’s final product to the process and work of achieving it. A focus on process is not appropriate for all group tasks but may be essential for those carrying the expectation of cross-cultural skill development and collaboration.

- **Whether tasks can be designed so that cross-cultural engagement is necessary for successful completion.** This becomes more likely where tasks are authentic. One example is a task which requires interviewing someone from another culture as well as undertaking research using more conventional sources or contexts, followed by comparing the learning gained from both and applying that to a real task.

- **How to ensure rewards, and specifically grades, reflect the time and effort involved.** Rewards also need to include time students spend getting to know each other, learning new skills, and negotiating across their diverse expectations and experiences. Often, adjusting rewards requires assessing the group’s work along the way as well as their final result or product. Rebalancing the value of process and product encourages students to see their efforts at ‘mixing’ as worthwhile and valuable.

3.3 Professional development for intercultural engagement

Strategies to encourage interaction should include development opportunities for support and administrative staff as well as teachers and programme managers and designers. The range of roles which could have an impact is broad: international student advisers, learning advisers, counsellors and professional development staff. They are likely to welcome being presented with examples of successful initiatives and a chance to consider how they might work in their own contexts. Discussions of initiatives to foster integration will need to pay attention to wider contextual issues such as shared responsibility for students’ academic and skills development or pressures to recruit certain groups of students.
It is likely that multiple strategies adapted to individual, institutional and disciplinary contexts and modelling of good practice in the design and delivery of professional development programmes for internationalisation will be most effective. Staff, especially teaching staff, are more likely to undertake personal development in cross-cultural and interactive teaching approaches if there are ways to recognise and reward their efforts, again mirroring how they themselves will work with students.

4. Top resources

Finding Common Ground: Enhancing interaction between domestic and international students. An ALTC project led by the University of Melbourne on the benefits of culturally diverse peer groups, including:
- DVD Finding Common Ground, featuring the voices of staff and students from a range of Australian universities.
- Guide for Academics, practical suggestions for enhancing practice and a background paper on the project findings.

Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2009), Examples of good practice in assisting international students to integrate with Australian students and the wider community (PDF 1.21MB)


Tomkinson, B. Introduction to Managing Humanitarian Aid Projects. See

5. What is the evidence?

Further Reading:


Turner, Y. (2006a) “So how was it for You?” Evaluating the transnational education experience five years on. *The International Journal of Learning*, 12, 249-257


6. Related resources


Tomkinson, B. *Introduction to Managing Humanitarian Aid Projects.*
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