The Enhancing Series Case Studies: International Learning Experience

Teaching and Learning in an Environment Challenged by Cultural Diversity

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Key Words
Cultural diversity, pedagogy, communication, change / development

Summary
This case study is concerned with teaching, learning and assessment in an environment which is culturally very diverse not only in terms of its student body but also in terms of its faculty members. Another factor which plays a significant role in the equation is that the School is undergoing rapid and fundamental institutional changes. These changes include challenges raised by two current accreditation processes, an IT project in which the existing (antiquated) system will be entirely replaced by a state-of-the-art fully integrated system and the consequent need for adaptation of the administrative structures to new requirements.

Objective
The objective of this case study is to air the issues which confront the institution and give an account of the solutions that have thus far been applied – or are to be applied in the future – but it is hoped that it will also encourage debate and a mutual exchange of experiences, views and solutions amongst institutions facing similar types of challenges. That said, at a recent workshop at South Bank University at which the School was represented, we came away with the impression that our School has certain unusual characteristics concerning its cultural diversity which may well add other dimensions to the discussion.
Context

Situated in the north-west of France, this relatively small business school has 1658 students, 50 ‘permanent’ faculty members and 130 adjunct faculty members. ‘Permanent’ in French terms refers to faculty members who have a contract with the School giving them, for example, full social security coverage. However, it should be noted that in this particular institution these contracts vary between a ‘five day contract’ and a ‘two day contract’, and that salaries are calculated on a pro rata basis depending on the number of days the person is contracted to work in the School.

Being founded relatively recently in 1990, the School is growing fast, with an extension of almost the same size as the original building already having been built and with plans for a further similarly-sized extension being projected for the very near future. It belongs to the prestigious group of French business schools known as the ‘Grandes Ecoles’.

The School is licensed by the French Minister of Education to deliver undergraduate and post-graduate degrees. Institutional and programme accreditations by the British Open University Validation Services (OUVS) means that British degrees are also delivered. (DipHE, BAIB, MAIB and PhD.) The dual nationality of our programmes necessitates a process of harmonisation of the French and British educational systems which has become a daily juggling act – for which we have acquired a certain degree of agility.

From the outset the School differentiated itself from other ‘Grandes Ecoles’ by its insistence on being international in its approach to pedagogy and the recruitment of students and faculty members. At present 42 different nations are represented amongst students and 20 amongst faculty members. Except for one or two staff the administration of the School remains profoundly French.

All our Masters programmes and our PhD programme are taught in English. Of our undergraduate programmes 60% are taught in English in the first year (mainly French students) and 80% in our second year. It is in the second year that we welcome large numbers of non-French students. And, just to complicate things, it should be noted that students come to us from other institutions for the third and fourth years of their undergraduate programme. (DipHE and BA).

Faculty members can be broadly classified as follows:

- Adjunct faculty who are predominantly French in origin and outlook, but most of whom speak and teach in English.

- ‘Permanent’ faculty who represent 20 different countries of origin who all teach in English and may, or may not, have a knowledge of French.

Following the recent arrival of a new Director General, a significant impetus has been given to both research and to teaching with a number of research professors being recruited – each one from a different cultural background. Whereas in the past the high degree of informal contact between faculty members (and also administrative staff) was sufficient to satisfy the needs of a young developing school,
it is now apparent that the sudden arrival of a significant number of new faculty demands more formal means to achieve the current strategic objectives both in general terms and more particularly in respect of pedagogical issues. Resistance to change by established faculty members and bewilderment at the apparent lack of organisation by new recruits have, not surprisingly, raised questions which need answers.

**Key Issues Challenging the Institution**

In pedagogical terms there are three main areas demanding attention.

- Establishing mutually acceptable approaches and practices in terms of teaching, learning and assessment at the School in such a significantly culturally diverse faculty.
- Ensuring that these approaches are coherent with the tasks to be accomplished as defined by the pedagogical strategy of the School
- Ensuring that these approaches enhance the value derived from the cultural diversity within the School instead of reducing it. In dealing with these issues we have decided not to treat them separately for the simple fact that they are, quite evidently, inter-dependent.

By way of a more specific introduction to these issues it is helpful to know that the institution attempts to alert students to the different approaches to teaching and learning issues in a number of different ways. For example, the following table appears in the student handbook for all programmes – along with further verbal explanations of the implications for their learning experience at the School and the need for adaptation to function in a culturally diverse learning environment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classical French System</th>
<th>Pure Case Method (Harvard and Western Ontario)</th>
<th>Classical UK System</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SYSTEM</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Competitive examination performance</td>
<td>- High failure rates in programme</td>
<td>- Relatively competitive entrance based on &quot;A&quot; level performance</td>
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<td>- Elitist</td>
<td>- Competitive culture within school</td>
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<td>- Cartesian</td>
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<td>- Low failure rates once in school</td>
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<td><strong>TEACHER</strong></td>
<td><strong>STUDENT</strong></td>
<td><strong>Table 1</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- A ‘font of knowledge’</td>
<td>- Takes notes</td>
<td>In addition, student group work is so arranged that members of each group are from as many different cultural backgrounds as possible. Part of the feedback session will include a discussion about the issues arising from functioning together. Age-old, but still highly relevant questions such as, “What did you learn from this experience?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Lectures</td>
<td>- Learns after the lecture</td>
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<tr>
<td>- No course book</td>
<td>- Does exercise after class</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Distributes handouts</td>
<td>- Student follows teacher</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Provides a ‘correction’</td>
<td>- Student is passive</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Teacher takes responsibility</td>
<td>- Students expects right answer</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Student reads theory and reads case and analyses case (including in a group) before class</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Encourages participation</td>
<td>- Student takes responsibility for the process</td>
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<td>- Animator pushes students to do analysis and find alternative solutions</td>
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<td>- Uses a course book as a base</td>
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<td>- Uses inductive method of learning</td>
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<td>- Forces students to defend solutions</td>
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<td>- Teacher is an expert</td>
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<td>- Lectures about points which interest him and/or key elements</td>
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<td>- Discussions in tutorials/small groups</td>
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<td>- Expects students to learn outside of classroom</td>
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“What did you find useful / difficult / frustrating?” incite students towards greater awareness of the experience and the role it can play in their professional development aiming at a career in an international business environment.

Also, it is worth noting that our teaching sessions conform to normal French practice. i.e. they last three hours which many foreign students and new faculty members from other cultural backgrounds often find excessively long.

**Striving for a Higher Degree of Harmony in the Pedagogical Process**

Three points which have a decisive influence on the student / teacher experience should be noted here:

- Students come specifically to the School to live cultural diversity at first hand. It is one of the School’s selling points.

- They usually have a romantic idea of what the experience will be like before actually facing it.

- They are apt (as are we all) to confuse differences which are truly cultural and those which are related to individual personality differences.

Thus the challenge is to create a coherent pedagogical strategy amongst faculty members without stifling individual style, innovation and spontaneity, and which is centred on student needs but which, at the same time, exploits the unique cultural environment in the School to maximum advantage.

Attempts to deal with this issue are being made by holding workshops along with the creation of a website solely for the use of faculty – both ‘permanent’ and adjunct. We limit these workshops to four per semester to avoid other commitments that faculty have. Attendance is excellent but only represents approximately half of the ‘permanent’ faculty members, those who consistently display a high degree of motivation in wishing to develop a common, but not exclusive, approach to pedagogy. The less enthusiastic remain convinced that ‘they know best’ and they already hold the key to all the challenges they currently meet in the classroom. It is a long process to persuade them to share their wisdom! However, there are signs that progress is being made.

Adjunct faculty present a different challenge. If the commitment to pedagogical development in terms of the harmonisation of styles is only enthusiastically backed by half of the ‘permanent’ faculty, then even fewer adjunct faculty members show any positivity towards it. How can one demand the same degree of commitment from them as one does from those ‘permanents’ who are present at the School during working hours? Clearly, the degree of commitment, either freely given or contractually imposed cannot be the same.
It is hoped that the faculty web site will help to remedy this to some degree at least by inducing a feeling of belonging to the academic community of the School and also to ownership of the fruits of its labours.

Suggestions have also been made that adjunct faculty should be paid an attractive hourly rate plus expenses to attend meetings and workshops, but where does one draw the line? If this were implemented as a blanket solution then the cost alone would be prohibitive in view of the fact that many of our adjunct faculty come from the UK or North America. So, what about taking the number of hours they teach in the School and inviting only those who contribute hours above a certain figure? Again, the cost would be prohibitive. Many of our adjunct faculty who teach a significant number of hours (usually seminar style) come from far away and also have other engagements thus making it almost impossible to find a mutually convenient time to meet up.

Despite the fact that the School has an impressive number of staff and students from culturally different origins, it is still the case that management works on the classical French ‘patriarchal’ system and the institution’s administrative staff are practically all French. One of the ways in which this situation impacts on the pedagogy within the School is that there is an underlying (and perfectly understandable) mistrust of anything not done the French way. This is particularly apparent in our first year undergraduate programmes where French students encounter non-French faculty for the first time. Typically, a French student will leave such a session feeling that he or she ‘hasn’t had his money’s worth’ simply because he has been invited to take part in interactive processes of various kinds. To a French student this approach simply means that the professor doesn’t know his subject and is incapable of standing up and delivering what is called a ‘cours magistral’ or a traditional lecture with no room for any exchange whatsoever between the lecturer and the students.

Another difficulty for French students is that they find it difficult to understand that when there is a moment of teacher input they are required to be attentive and silent. Being polychronic themselves it appears to be a draconian measure on the part of the teacher to insist upon absolute silence for even a short period.

In these cases it does, of course, behove the more experienced members of faculty to advise their colleagues to explain their approach to the students before they attempt to begin their first session with French students. Despite this, it is only in their second year with us that French students really grasp what is expected of them. The reason? It is at this point that French students share – and are often the minority – in classes peopled by students from other countries who have highly developed interactive skills and a whole panoply of expectations related to the modules they are registered for. Cultural behaviour runs deep.

However, this is but the tip of the iceberg. What of the difficulties of the non-French student who arrives with all his or her expectations in this multicultural environment?

Even small but significant signals indicate some of the underlying attitudes to professors. Addressing the writer, students will prefix the name of a faculty member with Mister, Doctor, Professor, Alan or even, “Hey, you!” From your own experience of dealing with foreign students most of you reading this article will readily identify the cultural background of the students who use each one of these methods of
address. Firstly, the Frenchman then the Eastern European and so on. By the end of their stay most of them will have arrived at “Alan”. (The “Hey you!” seems to disappear rather quickly – but that may have something to do with a personal reaction on the part of faculty to this appellation. Again, undoubtedly to do with my mixed cultural origins.)

The styles exemplified in Table 1 are, of course, generalisations. They are also presented verbally during induction processes but informal enquiry indicates that exposure to them makes little impact in preparing the student for what happens in the classroom.

It has been observed that the relationship between teacher and student is also a frequent source of confusion and dissatisfaction. It is a common experience to find North American students who say what they think and tend to regard their professor as a partner in an educational process. Here a quite blatant degree of familiarity may exist between teacher and student. This is sharply contrasted with the French student who regards such familiarity as unwanted and possibly undignified and certainly undeserved. With the passage of time and contact with students from other countries who expect a more open and familiar relationship between student and teacher, these students may become more at ease with this approach. We are all familiar with this phenomenon.

So, what is the effect of such diversity on both faculty and student cultural expectations and values? Confusion? No hard and fast rules have been formulated for the behaviour of either student or teacher. Thus, whether in the classroom or in one-to-one encounters the success of the relationship depends on the individual personality of each concerned. The naïve illustrations cited in the above paragraphs scratch but the surface. With the high number of faculty being firmly rooted in their own culture, and that being equally true of the student body, the success of teaching and learning depends much more on the personalities involved than it would normally do so.

It may be felt that a socially fragmented faculty is being described here and that more effort should be made to ‘standardise’ attitudes to the pedagogical tasks facing its members. Curiously, there exists a well founded feeling of solidarity and mutual respect between most faculty members but it is rarely transferred into social contact within or outside the work context. To add to what is, after all, a lack of dialogue between faculty members, each professor leaves work to return to an environment which is essentially reflects his or her own culture of origin. (Most have brought their families to France.) By some it is considered to be a ‘refuge’ from the challenge of juggling with multiple cultures at work which is demanding, tiring and frustrating with, of course, the odd moment of satisfaction in a job well done!

Faculty members thus experience the same challenges as do students upon whom we impose tasks to be accomplished. Their choice of behaviour does, however, tend to be based more on an instinctive reaction to situations rather than to the type of analysis of intercultural encounters to which we subject our students! Perhaps a part solution may be to submit faculty to the same consciousness-raising exercises?
External Influences

Our validation by the OUVS has, over the years, meant that the School has been forced into at least a basic agreement about how assessments should be formulated and delivered. A bid for EQUIS and AACSB accreditations is lending a new impetus to our efforts.

That said, recent benchmarking exercises have highlighted the fact that we are fundamentally very conservative in our assessment approaches and that we are not necessarily evaluating the acquisition of learning objectives in the most efficient way. Continuous assessment consists mostly of an individual or group project with all the difficulties concerning issues of fairness attached to that, and a final written, summative, examination.

Two recent workshops at the School - modelled on similar workshops held in the UK which were attended by a faculty member - have had a very positive effect in inciting a more effective approach to assessing student achievement but, as is to be expected, the more conservative members of the community need more convincing!

The Impact of Sudden and Rapid Change

With the arrival of a new Director General, radical long-awaited changes have caused an expected series of ‘tsunami’ at all levels of the organisation. Previously, the institution was decidedly weak in terms of the management’s commitment to research despite the fact that the previous research director had launched a successful research strategy with very little support except that of sympathetic and proactive colleagues.

The arrival of the new Director General heralded the advent of several new faculty members from Sweden, Germany, China, Canada, Senegal and elsewhere, most of whom are primarily interested in research, exactly what the School needs. The younger end amongst the new recruits had very little, if any, teaching experience. Of course, faculty commitment to the student learning process diminished at an alarming rate as research workloads were also imposed on inexperienced or ‘rusty’ researchers and, inevitably, the balance shifted.

To redress this, the Associate Dean responsible for the Pedagogy of the School appointed a senior faculty member with both management and teaching experience within the establishment to encourage and co-ordinate teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) related activities. The TLA co-ordinator has no particular authority but has access to project development committees, programme management and other meetings, and also has a coaching and mentoring role to help with the induction of new teaching staff. The lack of executive authority for this mission was a deliberate choice in the hope that initiatives generated by the co-ordinator’s activities would be viewed by colleagues as their input rather than as innovation being imposed from above.

The result is that faculty efforts, performance levels and development are being closely monitored across the board and, where there is a need, the means are
generally being put in place to satisfy them. This approach has resulted in a significant increase in the degree of faculty commitment to, and interest in, student learning in the last few months. The overall effect is a growth towards a more harmonised approach in terms of teaching styles without in any way impinging upon those essential elements of personality and spontaneity which add that touch of charisma to help keep students awake in our long classroom sessions!

Students are thus being exposed to a richer culturally diverse experience which is beginning to make fuller and more intelligent use of the internal resources and environment of the School.

Concluding Remarks

It has doubtless become apparent in this article that the School is undergoing a period of fundamental change in terms of its development and that this is involving radical strategic adjustments. Faculty response to this change and the effect it is having on the student learning process is difficult to assess at present and much work is needed here. Feedback from class delegate meetings, course evaluation information indicates a more positive trend. The emphasis in comments from student delegates has shifted from the teaching to the quality of chocolate and biscuits to be had from the slot machines.

French management style imposes itself quite firmly despite the significant non-French presence in both faculty and the student body. This is not to be taken as a negative criticism of the French approach to management which, for those readers who are not familiar with it, appears to be based on the vulgarly (in French) expressed “système D”. This consists of much discussion followed by a summary decision taken by the manager after having ‘democratically listened’ to those included in the debate. The decision is implemented, then a “pick up the bits when it all goes wrong and make the best of it” strategy is initiated to correct any malfunctioning. This may seem a somewhat chaotic approach but it can be surprisingly successful, although its success depends entirely on the good-will of the participants and their almost blind confidence in the skills of the manager heading the project. ‘Patriarchal’ is the name some might give to this approach to management. Non-French faculty and students are required to make a quantum leap in cultural terms to be able to function effectively with this approach. Failure on the part of non-French faculty to understand this way of getting things done has resulted in a slowing down of adaptation to new challenges.

Drawing all these threads together, it becomes apparent that there are three underlying issues to which no truly effective solutions have been found.

Firstly, global and integrated communication between faculty (both ‘permanent’ and adjunct) and management needs to be urgently reviewed, after which effective means of communication need to be created to ensure maximum understanding on issues related to pedagogy in the School. The fact that some faculty members have little or no knowledge of French pre-supposes the need to ensure that all information is made available in both English and French – a costly and time consuming activity which is beyond current resources to deal with in a truly effective way.
Secondly, the question of motivating faculty members to adopt a more open-minded attitude to the changes necessary for the development of the School needs to be addressed in a more proactive fashion. This must also be global in its application and endowed with the means to properly measure the effect of changes already made or those which are to be introduced.

Thirdly, if students – and particularly students from different cultural backgrounds - are going to enjoy an optimal learning experience at the School, then faculty have to be made more aware of specific student learning difficulties. The question of learning in a second (foreign) language has not been tackled here but it has been shown that it plays a significant role in slowing the learning process down. Likewise, it behoves the School to seriously consider ways in which faculty are made aware of their own difficulties in coping with cultural diversity – in the same manner as students are – so that a greater understanding of, and thus a better adaptation to, the needs of our students is achieved.

Clearly, these points are inseparable simply because they are interdependent.

There is, of course, an alternative way of regarding this unique period of development in the School’s history. It may well be viewed, and put to use as, a multi-faceted, multi-cultural management learning process which concerns all members of the community: students, faculty and administration. After all, the degree of cultural diversity of those involved is unusually high and the juxtaposition of a multicultural faculty with that of a multicultural student body presents an opportunity not to be missed.

A rich field for research which is slowly being recognised as such in the School.

Finally, we would welcome comments, ideas, or relevant experiences which might further the development of these issues - expressed in either a formal or informal way.

**Contacts**

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Dr Alan Darricotte has a world-wide experience in business, teaching and coaching. His first appointment, in the after sales service of Pennwalt Engineering Inc., for which part of the brief was to teach existing staff the principles of marketing, awakened an early interest in teaching and learning. Following this, various posts along with much consultancy work led to requests from companies to prepare their employees for overseas missions.

Since 1989 Alan has taught in various universities which have an interest in advancing their pedagogy in an international context. In 1999 he accepted the post of Head of Marketing at the very international Ecole Supérieure de Commerce de Rennes, France, where he subsequently became M.B.A. Director. He has recently been appointed co-ordinator of teaching, learning and assessment activities within the School with a special brief to develop these aspects in the context of the cultural diversity of the School.

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Dr Rod McColl has more than 25 years academic experience in Australia, Asia and France where he is a Professor in Marketing at ESC Rennes School of Business. Dr McColl has a Doctorate in Education, Master’s degree in Business (Research) and a Bachelor’s degree in marketing. Over the past 15 years he has also completed more than 300 marketing studies across many countries.

Rod is a co-author of Marketing in Australia 2nd ed. Australia’s largest selling marketing text and is lead author of Services Marketing: A Managerial Perspective published by McGraw-Hill. Recent peer reviewed articles have appeared in the Journal of Customer Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction and Complaint Behaviour and Total Quality Management.

References

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