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Promoting Intercultural Engagement: Developing a Toolkit for Staff and Students in Higher Education

Mark Dunford, Nita Muir and Pilar Teran, University of Brighton, UK
Marita Grimwood, Independent Learning and Teaching Consultant

ABSTRACT

This 'on the horizon' paper describes and reflects on the development of an intercultural engagement toolkit for academic staff in Higher Education Institutions, for use across a range of disciplines. Higher Education in the UK is continuing to grapple with two aspects of an internationalising sector: increasing numbers of non-UK students (HESA, 2015) and the need to prepare students for a globalised society (Guimaraes-Iosif, 2011). Academic staff are often uncertain about how to engage with these forces in their curricula (Barker, Hibbins, & Farrelly, 2011). While they have different levels of awareness of issues and theories relating to internationalisation of the curriculum, even those with high levels of international experience can be unsure as to how to implement effective changes to learning and teaching. A reflective toolkit to support academic staff was developed with funding from the Higher Education Academy, aiming to support universal processes of cultural negotiation in the context of programme teams and class groups. These resources have been developed following thematic analysis of focus groups and interviews with academics and students across a range of disciplines. Six key areas were identified as being influential: intercultural dialogue, global citizenship, positioning of the academic, design of curricula and assessment, international collaboration and communications. This paper will explore these themes and the theoretical framework which is the scaffolding for the toolkit, including the most recent literature (Killick, 2015; Leask, 2015). It also explores successes and frustrations experienced in the process, and ideas for the toolkit's future development.

Keywords: Intercultural engagement; intercultural communication; curriculum internationalisation

Introduction

This paper describes and reflects on the development of a reflective 'toolkit' to support academics in developing intercultural engagement in the classroom. It was a response to two aspects of an internationalising sector: an increased number of non-UK students (HESA, 2015) and the need to prepare all students, from the UK and elsewhere, for a globalised society (Guimaraes-Iosif, 2011). The toolkit, which is a series of reflective exercises, 'talking heads' videos, and simple self-evaluation tools, is designed for use in course teams and with class groups. It was developed by a team at the University of Brighton between January and July 2015, to be used across a range of disciplines. This paper reflects back on the process from its initial conception to the completion of the University of Brighton team's work on it, and its submission to the funding body – the Higher Education Academy (HEA). At the time of writing, the toolkit is due to be developed into an interactive, web-based resource for the HEA's website.

Historically, the University of Brighton's approach to Internationalisation has been rather fragmentary. The Strategic Plan (2012–2015) set out a laudable ambition to foster internationalisation of learning and research, with commitment to nurturing values of inclusivity, yet this policy was not aligned with clear strategic drivers. The result was a series of well-intentioned activities scattered across the University – for example, two elective modules in Language and Intercultural Awareness were established in 2012 – but with some important areas inadvertently neglected. Yet with no coordination of activity, such strengths often flowed from individual commitment. The context changed in 2010, when the University of Brighton International College (UBIC) was established as the result of a partnership with Kaplan International Colleges. The college was created to provide international students with a foundation year in English Language and their chosen academic discipline. This has meant a steadily increasing number of students from different countries entering a range of the University of Brighton's undergraduate degree programmes. Therefore the idea of an internationalised curriculum, whereby *all* students are supported to benefit fully from the significant intercultural learning opportunities available to them, has become even more relevant.

With this context in mind, a Faculty-based team at the University began developing a co-ordinated approach to staff development in this area, building on strengths and redressing weaknesses. Following some initial workshops and awareness-raising events, the team extended to include colleagues from across the University. We gained support and funding from the HEA through a Strategic Enhancement Programme in Internationalisation. We had noted that, while levels of awareness of issues and theories relating to internationalisation of the curriculum vary widely, even those academic staff with high levels of international experience are often uncertain as to how to implement effective changes to learning and teaching. Thus, we set out to create a toolkit to support universal processes of cultural negotiation in the context of programme teams and class groups. Our initiative sought to bring a greater

understanding of the value of curriculum internationalisation to the University in order to meet strategic ambition; deliver cultural change; and – primarily – bring about more effective learning and teaching for all.

The toolkit rationale

Our rationale for the toolkit's design was that actively enabling and facilitating staff in intercultural engagement with their own students can promote meaningful reflection, leading to attitudinal change and creative growth. As Leask (2015) says, "internationalisation of the curriculum is situated at the intersection of policy and practice in universities" (p. 3), and "a critical part of the [...] process involves critiquing the dominant paradigms on which the content and pedagogy of curriculum are based" (p. 105). The toolkit thus consists of a series of reflective exercises to support academic staff from different disciplines to work with their students and with one another to assess their existing practice and promote intercultural engagement in the curriculum. Following Killick (2015), we believe that:

Significant change is rarely a painless process; it involves stepping outside the ready-to-hand and can threaten our identities. Significant learning extends beyond competencies into values, attitudes, notions of self-efficacy to constitute ways of being just as much for academic staff as it does for students. (p.177)

In recognition of the sometimes 'threatening' nature of this work, we chose to present the toolkit as a series of small, practically-focused exercises that can either be used as an organised programme of changes, or engaged with in response to particular issues. In this, we recognised the very varied existing levels of staff engagement. The 'toolkit style' design, with exercises on each of six key themes, and a self-evaluation task for each theme, is intended to encourage reflection on wider issues by facilitating small-scale engagement in the first instance.

As Leask (2003) describes, research shows that effective intercultural learning for students depends on the values, commitment and culture of the whole university, whereby we all become intercultural learners. Such cultural change, she concludes, needs to be addressed through "strategically planned professional development and student services for all students and staff" (p. 7). Language learning can also have a role (Harbon & Moloney, 2015). However, what we certainly cannot assume is that intercultural learning will occur simply as a result of intercultural contact (Volet & Ang, 1998; Killick, 2015, p. 178).

An active and willing engagement with other cultures that is founded on an understanding of one's own cultural position is an essential attribute for staff responsible for facilitating learning in culturally diverse groups. Genuine intercultural engagement, the ability to operate with social and professional competence across different cultures, undermines perceptions of culturally different behaviour as 'problematic'. Research highlights a number of examples of this. Leask (2009) has argued that plagiarism needs to be understood as an "intercultural encounter" rather than a problem. Rasi, Hautakangas and Vayayrnen (2015) argue that "designing [the] culturally inclusive affordance networks" that are important to student retention needs to start from an appreciation of "students life-worlds" rather than modifying existing structures. Ryan and Viète (2009), highlight the need for "respectful interactions" between students of different cultures predicated on a rejection of normative assumptions which are based on native speakers.

Much of the literature on curriculum internationalisation explores what needs to happen to enable effective learning. However, while Carroll and Ryan (2005) provide plenty of practical guidance, the imperatives elsewhere in the literature are not usually matched by practical resources (Caruana & Spurling, 2007). As Carroll and Ryan's book argues, creating positive conditions for international students' learning means addressing difficulties experienced by all students. Therefore improving intercultural engagement can be expected to improve the student learning experience more widely.

A values-based approach drawing on equity and openness to internationalisation is essential to the long-term effectiveness of the learning and teaching environment for all students, but particularly for those whose educational background is embedded in a culture that is radically different to that of their university environment. The team felt that producing an interactive toolkit with a focused approach to intercultural engagement would have the following benefits:

- Providing an 'entry point' for staff to engage with deep, attitudinal aspects of intercultural engagement through an initial assessment and then offering practically useful approaches to teaching diverse groups.
- Encouraging the embedding of the values and practice of intercultural engagement in day-to-day learning and teaching activities, and programme structures.
- Presenting challenges, sometimes radically destabilising ones, to preconceived assumptions and ideas through an initial critical reflection on academic practice just as genuine engagement with other cultural perspectives makes teaching more effective (cf. Carroll and Ryan above), so it can only enrich intellectual projects and processes.

Methodology

The methodology used for this project was robust with a consultation conducted across two campuses and from student and staff representations originating from arts, social sciences, health, education and humanities disciplines. Reflecting this, our project team included staff working across different geographical areas, as well as different epistemological paradigms – a fact which was in some respects challenging yet also added a richness to the discussion. The team was further enhanced by the appointment of an

independent specialist who offered a perspective on both data collection and analysis that was more cross-disciplinary and external to university structures.

Because the toolkit is intended both to be adapted to meet internal needs and shared more widely across the sector, our consultation across different disciplines ensured that the toolkit was flexible enough to meet the needs of practice-based courses as well as those that are more theoretically orientated. Working across schools also allowed us to draw on activity within disciplines where the number of international students is relatively high and developmental pedagogical activity has already taken place. We complemented this with innovative work in the schools where relatively little development has taken place to date. One of the key benefits of this was that it involved a number of related and mutually supporting initiatives working together across disciplines to facilitate a more internationalised culture across the University.

We held four focus groups with staff and students from the range of disciplines listed above, between March and June 2015. All participation was voluntary and participants were drawn from a mixture of UK and other national backgrounds. The data from these focus groups was triangulated with data gathered from one-to-one interviews with academic staff from five schools, and thematically analysed. Focus groups and interviews were framed by a common set of questions agreed by the team. The questions structured discussions enough to ensure that they were similar in scope, and were split into three sections: intercultural awareness (including how staff and students saw their own cultural self-awareness and how they thought their learning and teaching developed it); intercultural awareness in practice (focusing on the participants' experiences of specific aspects of learning and teaching, including writing, group work, discussion, and using different cultural perspectives); and global citizenship (including what it might mean, whether participants felt it relevant to their disciplines, and whether their concept of it was reflected in their own learning and/or teaching). Global citizenship was chosen because it was a term used in University policy and strategy documents, but – the team felt – not consistently interpreted or valued.

The student focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed, and extensive notes were taken during the one-to-one staff interviews. All of this research was conducted by members of the project team, who subsequently met to discuss the transcripts and interview notes, share their perspectives, and identify the main themes that emerged. A team member then wrote up a summary of the discussion outcomes, which was circulated and further amended in the light of team feedback.

Research findings and toolkit overview

Both the staff interviews and the student focus groups revealed confused and diverse interpretations of terms such as 'global citizenship' and 'intercultural education'. This was further compounded by a lack of understanding of intercultural competence amongst some participants. There was a call from participants to challenge current curricula to acknowledge different cultures and shift from a Eurocentric focus. However, despite this, there was no clear vision of what an internationalised curriculum should be. Both staff and student responses indicated that whilst diversity was acknowledged, it was not fully integrated into teaching and learning practices. Students in particular did not manifest a clear civic commitment to their society or the global environment.

The six key themes we identified are listed below, with a brief summary of the reflective resources we created for the toolkit, in response to them:

- **Intercultural dialogue:** The toolkit includes resources to facilitate classroom and course team discussion of, and reflection on, cultural differences, including recognising how different cultural assumptions affect learning and teaching.
- **Global citizenship:** The toolkit has taken this term as a deliberately problematic starting-point for course teams and students to consider the values basis of any curriculum internationalisation initiative.
- **Positioning of the academic:** The toolkit contains tools to encourage staff and students to reflect on the challenge to the idea of 'academic as expert' presented by a culturally diverse student cohort; and how responding to such challenges creatively may ultimately benefit learning and teaching.
- **Design of curricula and assessment:** Tools in this section support academics to take an overview of modules and programmes; and to assess how well they (might be changed to) address the needs and interests of students from different cultural backgrounds.
- **International exchange and collaboration:** The toolkit provides simple frameworks to encourage staff reflection on how such collaborations may be properly integrated with learning objectives and the curriculum.
- **Communications:** The focus of this section is on the need for any curriculum internationalisation initiatives to be well understood and communicated to – and between – students and academic staff.

The project's early findings, including a discussion of these themes, were shared at the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) conference on Internationalising the Curriculum, held in Manchester in May 2015. Comments and feedback from this greatly supported the development of the toolkit and confirmed its relevance beyond the University of Brighton. However, time restrictions placed by the funding body limited how much we could implement all the suggestions. The March to July timescale meant that, by the time the research and consultation process was completed, and a full draft was ready, teaching had finished. Therefore there were no opportunities to pilot it effectively with staff and students in authentic teaching situations.

In the light of this constraint, we reviewed the resource with colleagues within the University of Brighton and shared it more widely with a group of volunteers from the SEDA community. Feedback from the latter was in tune with our own thinking that, although we

drew on the literature of curriculum internationalisation throughout the process, and members of the team were well-informed in the areas of curriculum internationalisation and intercultural communication, additional time was needed to situate these practice-based resources in the context of key research evidence. One of the primary benefits of this would be to provide an additional impetus for staff to engage with the resources (Schofield, 2015). In addition, it was clear to all of us that a timescale of a full calendar year would ensure adequate time for the rigorous process of piloting, review, and revision that we all saw as important to maximise the toolkit's efficacy.

Conclusion - and looking forward

The toolkit is now being used internally at the University of Brighton, with immediate plans to integrate it into the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching for academic staff. It will in addition influence the equivalent Postgraduate Certificate in Education for health care practitioners in the School of Health Sciences. The Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT), which has responsibility for developing pedagogy and practice, and has also been involved in developing the resources, has already made it the focus of a CLT staff awayday. The aim of this was to ensure that it will influence all curriculum development across the University. Ensuring wider engagement will depend on a person or a team leading, supporting and assisting the academics who use it, and this leadership will need to be based centrally in the CLT.

The team behind the toolkit is aiming to ensure continued leadership and co-ordination internally, as the toolkit is finally piloted in the context of authentic learning and teaching. Externally, the toolkit will shortly be made available on the HEA's website. However, due to the funding body's recently altered priorities, it is at best uncertain whether they will provide a platform for the future revised version that the team hopes to develop. The core team is currently considering opportunities to revisit and complete the project by incorporating learning and feedback from its piloting as described above. We also wish to embed the resources more explicitly and systematically in the literature. In the meantime, the toolkit will be accessible to academic staff at all UK institutions via the HEA, and we welcome feedback from users that might inform its future development.

Biographies

Mark Dunford is the Academic Quality and Partnership Director in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Brighton. He is also an active researcher and led the Pan European Silver Stories project (2013–2015). He was the primary contact at the University for the HEA's Strategic Enhancement Programme exploring the Internationalisation of the Curriculum.

Marita Grimwood is a freelance Academic Developer. She has professional and research interests in internationalisation of the curriculum and supporting postgraduates as teachers. She has previously worked as Professional Development Manager (Academic Staff) and Senior Project Officer (Recognising and Rewarding Teaching) at Newcastle University.

Nita Muir is a Principal Lecturer in the School of Health Sciences. She is a qualified nurse and teaches nursing and health students, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. Nita is a course leader, the international lead for nursing and midwifery in the school and is also completing her doctoral studies.

Pilar Terán is a senior lecturer and pathway leader for Spanish language and culture in the School of Humanities at University of Brighton. She also teaches a module on Intercultural Communication. Her current work and interests are focused on language learning and intercultural communicative competence, and internationalisation of the curriculum.

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