Teaching Intercultural Competence: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract. This paper presents a case study analysis of Intercultural Studies electives delivered to students as part of a Business Studies degree programme in Dundalk Institute of Technology, Ireland. A survey captured students' perceptions of the existing Intercultural Studies electives. Much of the literature endorses the importance of intercultural competence for students in general, and business graduates in particular, in a globalised world. The nature and range of active learning methods currently employed on this elective are also cited in the literature as being conducive to building intercultural competence. This was further evidenced in the findings from the student survey conducted. The conclusions of the case study present some clear opportunities regarding both the challenges and the importance of building awareness, knowledge and skills among graduates using a range of relevant teaching and learning methods.

Keywords: Intercultural competence, active learning, internationalisation, student supports.

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Introduction

Internationalisation in a globalised world has led to a greater appreciation of the need for intercultural competence among graduates (Perry & Southwell, 2007, Moodian, 2009). Success at the individual, societal and organisational level is seen to be strongly linked to the development and employment of intercultural competence in building and maintaining relationships (Morley & Cedrin, 2010, Deardorff, 2006, Hammer et al, 2003). Research further supports the value of intercultural competence in both the domestic and international business arena (Huang et al, 2003). However, while the need for graduates who are able to work effectively in a multicultural environment is not disputed, the concept itself appears in the literature and in the classroom in many guises and has generated much debate (Rathje, 2007; Perry & Southwell, 2011). As the term "intercultural competence" attracts most agreement among researchers and academics, it is adopted here.

Analysis of existing modules in the field of intercultural competence have detailed the debate on the range of definitions, scope and content available to students at third level colleges. Furthermore, there is a wide range of approaches and a lack of agreement on the assessment of students' level of intercultural competence on completion of individual modules or programmes (Deardorff, 2006 p 65, Fantini, 1997). Perry and Southwell (2011) define intercultural competence as "the ability to effectively and appropriately interact in an intercultural situation or context". This emphasis on skills development is evident in the textbooks e.g. Hofstede et al (2002), Beamer and Varner (2010) and Gibson (2002) all concentrate on teaching intercultural competence for the world of business through active learning. The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) advises the Irish government on current and future skills needs of the economy and on other labour market issues that impact on Ireland's enterprise and employment growth. Their 2012 report *Key Skills for Enterprise Trade Internationally* recommends the use of current resources to ensure that education and training provision and continuing professional development is fully aligned to the international trade skills requirements of enterprise. These skills include global management, international marketing, foreign languages and cultural awareness.

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Cognisant of these factors, a review of the modules in Intercultural Studies delivered as an elective since 2006 to students in the School of Business and Humanities in Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT), Dundalk, Ireland has been undertaken to ensure that graduates have the competence to interact in a multicultural environment and thus help fill the skills gap in the labour market.

Context

The Intercultural Studies programme has been delivered in its current format for the past six years and evaluated as part of the process of programmatic review carried out in the School of Business and Humanities in 2013. The goal was to extend our understanding of our teaching in order to make it more student-centered: "teachers transform their teaching to transform their learning" (Carnell, 2007). Each module seeks to ensure cultural competence as a key learning outcome, reinforced through emphasis on the role of history, geography and politics. The design and delivery of the modules, guided by the need to develop interculturally competent students, is focused on active learning methodologies; "intercultural competence plays a vital role in the learning experience" (Brogan, 2009).

The elective is comprised of 6 distinct but interlinked modules delivered over the 3 year degree programmes. In Year 1, two modules, *Modern Irish Society* and *The Shape of Europe* are delivered; in Year 2, *The Shape of America* and *Intercultural Communications*; and in Year 3, *Social Change* and *The Shape of Asia*. All 6 modules are delivered by 3 lecturers which has allowed for the development of a close working relationship among lecturers and between lecturers and students. This in turn helps ensure a high level of integration across modules, as well as providing an opportunity to develop a range of assessment methods to suit the students' needs, the course material and the style of delivery. A strong focus on student learning through reflection and active participation has informed the learning outcomes and assessment methods of all modules.

Class size ranges from 19 to 84. Over the course of the three years, teaching methods employed include lectures, tutorials, guest speakers,

reflective journals, exhibitions, group work, worksheets, visits from Erasmus and international students, presentations, interviews and examinations. Much of the teaching took place in class groups of approximately 20-25 students.

In 2011/2012, when the survey was conducted, there were 69 students studying in Year 3. As stated, a total of 39 completed the questionnaire (27 female and 12 male). Of these 39 students, 16 progressed to third level directly from second level, 13 were mature students (age 23 years or over), and 8 came from post-second level vocational or technological skills courses (Post Leaving Certificate courses - PLC). The majority of respondents (37) are studying for the BA in Business Studies (Management & Administration) with just 2 students from the BA in Business Information Systems degree. This reflects the numbers pursuing these programmes.

Experience of Active learning

Both Deardorff (2006) and Ingulsrud et al (2002) argue that a mix of qualitative and quantitative teaching methods should be employed in teaching intercultural competence. They believe that students should be assessed through the use of interviews, observation, portfolios as well as self and peer review. In the survey, students evaluated the teaching and assessment methods they had experienced, which included guest lecturers, movies/video clips, worksheets, group work and reflective journals. In the main, the assessment methods used are qualitative and focus on student engagement with rich detail.

While similar questions were asked of both the first and third year students, students who had completed the 6 modules of Intercultural Studies were able to provide more information than students who were just completing their second module. Therefore, the analysis of the experience of teaching and learning focuses firstly on third year responses and where appropriate, makes comparisons with first year responses.

Inviting guest lecturers to speak to students on specific topics over the course of the elective proved very popular among students. For third year students, the majority of respondents to the questionnaire were very

positive about guest lecturers. In particular, they reported that it was excellent to hear first-hand accounts of life in another culture. It gave them a great insight, showed them a different perspective on other cultures and helped them to understand the historical context. They also found that guest lecturers provided good information for their reflective journal as speakers were usually easy to understand and interesting to listen to, and later reflect on. This focus on personal reflection helps to develop intercultural competence since it moves beyond cultural contact and incorporates the student reflections. Some respondents stated however, that they felt some guest speakers provided too much information, and that they could not always see the relevance of the topic covered.

The response to the use of movies/documentaries and/or video clips was also very positive from both third and first years which is in line with Cavanagh's (2011) findings on the advantages of active learning. Third year students felt short clips helped clarify what might be a difficult or complex topic. For example, understanding the nature and impact of the French Revolution on France in particular and Europe and America in general, were aided by short clips. Respondents also reported that concepts that were abstract and difficult to understand were made more comprehensible through the use of movies. First year students liked the fact that short clips were used to explain issues, particularly if they found articles difficult to read. They also liked the variety of ways in which material was presented.

Other active learning methods such as the completion of worksheets in class also attracted positive feedback from both groups surveyed and were seen by students as having helped the learning process. Generally, third years stated that they were glad of the opportunity to complete worksheets in class whilst the information was still fresh in their minds. This learning task also helped them to focus on the specific topic and provided an opportunity for discussion in small groups which helped them develop their thinking and analytical skills. For first year students, completing the worksheets in class helped to reinforce the material presented in the lectures. They also felt that it helped to spread out the workload of the modules.

While Deardorff (2006) advises the use of interviews in teaching intercultural competence, these drew a mixed response from third year

students. They felt that by third year, they were well- acquainted with group work from a range of modules and knew the pitfalls. For example, they had learned to identify other students with whom they felt most comfortable working. Positive comments included the belief that group work reduced the workload and pressure. Students also acknowledged that group work was relevant to real-life work situations. First year students generally found group work difficult as they had to arrange meetings outside of class time and sometimes they did not know the other students.

The Reflective Journal provided a mechanism for personal involvement and critical analysis which is an active learning method promoted by Rogers (1983) and was introduced to students in Year 1. The third year students reported that initially they thought this would be an easy task. However, they came to realise that it required more work because it was based on the development and recording of their own opinions. By Year 2, most felt that they had developed the ability to summarise material and provide considered reflections. Most of the respondents preferred Reflective Journals to end of semester exams. They saw the completion of work for Intercultural Studies as a bonus as they could then focus on their examinations for other modules. They also stated that they found the Reflective Journals to be a helpful tool when writing their Year 3 essay as it had helped them develop their analytical and time management skills. Learning how to complete a Reflective Journal was something the first years reported as difficult as *"you had to teach yourself"* and *"it makes you think"*. They also felt that they had time to do the work over the semester and that the learning was *"not just for exams"*.

In general, respondents reported that while lecturers presented a lot of new, interesting and sometimes confusing material, the practical work covered in tutorials allowed students to better comprehend the meaning and relevance of topics. Tutorials also allowed students to develop and express their own opinions and enhanced group work.

New Skills for the 21st Century

Learners in the 21st century can very easily access information, but there is a fundamental need to have the ability to carry out tasks such as setting

goals, solving problems, planning well and multi-tasking, which are important transferable skills (www.skillsproject.ie). In addition to these organisational skills, the team also wished to design a module which would stimulate greater student creativity (Fryer, 2006).

Designing a new elective offered an opportunity to be innovative and further develop active learning strategies. The emphasis in Intercultural Studies is on continuous assessment as a means of testing students' knowledge, understanding and skills. In fact, only one of the 6 modules has an end of semester examination, which has a weighting of 50%.

The continuous assessment methods used reflect this focus on creativity in conjunction with the widely-held view that "assessment figured highly as one of the aspects of HE regarded as inhibiting creativity" (Fryer, 2006). These methods include group work (projects and interviews), presentations, reflective journals, worksheets and essays.

One of the main teaching methods used is group work which is an important transferable skill that simulates real work experience and allows students to develop team skills and to work together to solve problems. Formal interviews are used to provide the students with an opportunity to describe the key learning issues. Assignments are also designed to teach transferable skills such as how to summarise, critically analyse and reflect. Students learn to keep a Reflective Journal in which they summarise what they have learned and develop their own opinion on the issues. While much of the learning occurs through interaction with guest speakers and with students from other countries, print material is also used. This ranges from newspaper articles in first year, to academic journal articles in third year. Feedback (both verbal and written) is given on all assessments to facilitate student learning and is used to help monitor module content and delivery.

Each module is designed to complement the skill range and level of the students enrolled in an ordinary degree course. Students are encouraged to draw on their own life experiences, which can be particularly fruitful for mature students and/or students who have travelled or worked abroad. While some students will have studied history and/or geography at second level, Intercultural Studies is taught from first concepts to facilitate deep, rather than surface learning.

This focus on active learning is endorsed by Cavanagh (2011) who cites a range of research that links active learning with higher student motivation

and improved critical thinking skills. He outlines such advantages as increased confidence with class materials, better student attitudes and learners who are able to weigh evidence from a variety of sources, synthesise information and communicate their ideas. The assessment methods employed in the Intercultural Studies electives seek to develop this type of learning in which students focus on understanding concepts and learn to relate new ideas to previous knowledge, experiences and themes rather than memorising facts, an essential learning outcome for students of intercultural competence.

The fact that *experiential learning* has a quality of personal involvement and seeks to elicit a response from students by questioning or through collaborative problem-solving tasks means the whole person (both feelings and cognition) is involved in the learning event (Rogers, 1983). This active learning takes place during class time and involves short writing tasks such as summaries and worksheets, small group discussions and pair-and-share work. Audio visual material and web based learning technologies including Internet/web clips and film excerpts are also employed. However, some concerns have been noted among academics regarding the impact of new technologies on lecture attendance (Gosper *et al.,* 2008) while other studies contradict this fear by reporting that students will continue to attend lectures despite some sessions being available for download (Larkin, 2010) or on DkIT's VLE, Moodle. Cavanagh's (2011) study concludes that active learning helps students to improve their understanding of the topic or subject and maintain their interest during the sessions.

It is also noted from the research that cultural contact does not necessarily lead to competence or significant reduction of stereotypes. It is not enough to have knowledge and awareness of alternative cultures. This raises a major issue in teaching intercultural competence – how can the students' level of intercultural competence in practice be assessed? While intercultural competence is seen as a desirable outcome, there appears to be no one standardised model of measurement (Dunne, 2009; Otten, 2003).

The Impact Assessment of the Intercultural Modules

The aim of this research was to examine the challenges and opportunities in teaching Intercultural Competence. The methodology used

was twofold. Students enrolled on the Intercultural Studies electives at DkIT were surveyed to assess their perceptions of the modules. Information was gathered on student profile, experience of active learning methodologies, and the perceived impact of Intercultural Studies on students. Secondly, an analysis of current research provided information on the nature and importance of intercultural competence, as well as debates on how best to teach and assess intercultural competence. The increasingly multicultural nature of Irish society and the wider world, the need for interculturally competent graduates in the workforce, the lecturers' experience of developing and delivering the modules, and the current programmatic review together provided the impetus for this research.

The questionnaires gathered information on three main areas: student profile, experience of active learning methodologies, and the perceived impact of Intercultural Studies on students. Both open and closed questions were used. The survey was completed by both first year and third year student groups. This allowed for comparison between the experience of students at the early stages of the elective and those completing the final modules. As far as possible, both questionnaires followed the same format and addressed the same issues.

While all students were invited to participate in the study, they were advised that completion of the questionnaire was voluntary and that all information would remain confidential. The study was conducted anonymously. The rationale for the research was explained verbally and was also written on the questionnaire. Response rates were 71% (22 from class of 31) among first year students, and 56% (39 out of 69) among third year students.

A pilot survey, conducted in March 2012, highlighted a number of weaknesses in the design of the questionnaires. This led to the rewording of some questions and the inclusion of some additional questions to ensure comparability between the two questionnaires.

Once collected, the data was analysed and findings summarised in line with information and debate drawn from recent research literature on intercultural competence. Finally, a number of recommendations were made for the further teaching of intercultural competence, based on analysis of the information received from respondents, the documented

requirements of the work environment and the guidelines emerging from other research.

Findings and Discussion

This debate on the challenges and opportunities of teaching Intercultural Studies, based on the analysis of students' experience of the elective, is broadened and deepened by our increased awareness of the issues surrounding the teaching of intercultural competence, such as the needs of the workforce in today's multicultural environment and the complexity of ensuring that graduates are 'global-ready'.

Students were asked why they chose to take the Intercultural Studies elective and two main reasons were given. Firstly, they expressed the belief that it would be interesting and that it was about cultural awareness. The second reason given by respondents was the use of continuous assessment as opposed to end of semester examination. The observation was also made that Intercultural Studies was about self-awareness, and many respondents reported that Intercultural Studies had been recommended to them by former students for its assessment methods and focus on understanding the world today.

Before commencing the elective, students reported a belief that Intercultural Studies would be a *"useful subject"*, that *"it is relevant to my life in general"*, *"is relevant to my Business Studies course"*, and *"is an easy subject"*. Some stated that they knew nothing about the subject; others said they did have an understanding of the subject area.

A total of 22 first year students completed the questionnaire (11 male, 11 female) from a class of 31. As was the case in third year, the majority (9) came directly from second level, 5 were mature students, and 4 had completed a post-second level (PLC) course. Again, the majority (20) are studying for the BA in Business Studies (Management & Administration) and 2 are studying for the BA in Office Information Systems. Stated reasons for selecting this elective echoed those given by third years; namely, no end of semester examinations, the belief that the subject would be interesting and relevant, and that the subject came highly recommended by former students.

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While the Intercultural Studies module had evolved as a response to a perceived need for intercultural awareness among business graduates, there was no mechanism in place to accurately assess the level of competence a student had achieved. It was important to get information on how the Intercultural Studies modules might have impacted on students, particularly those who had studied the elective for three years. This method of self-reporting showed that most third year students felt the electives had increased their awareness and understanding of other cultures and they felt they were now more open-minded. They also reported that they felt this increase of knowledge had reduced their fear of other cultures and had facilitated their ability to communicate e.g. with students from China studying in DkIT, with Erasmus students etc. The majority stated that they now wanted to learn more about other societies. In general, students stated that they felt they had a better understanding of new immigrants and were more tolerant.

There was also evidence from the responses that students' attitudes and/or behaviour were influenced in a variety of ways. Many stated that they were more aware of their own values and traditions and they understood how society had helped form those values. This self-awareness allowed them to better understand aspects of other cultures. They cited examples such as religious beliefs, the role of women in society, attitudes towards institutions and prejudice. They felt that the focus of Intercultural Studies had provided a historical context for understanding recent social change. Mature students in particular said they felt their life experience helped them to engage with the subject.

Some specific examples given by respondents showed how the aims and learning outcomes of the Intercultural Studies modules had been achieved. Students commented that they were *"not judging as much"* which shows that they have learned to separate observation from interpretation – a key requirement for intercultural competence according to Hofstede et al (2002) and a key learning outcome for the Intercultural Communications module in particular. They also showed a greater interest and understanding of cultural diversity in DkIT e.g. awareness and participation in events such as Chinese New Year celebrations, International Day, learning about Thanksgiving Day in America etc. This is a theme that is incorporated in all modules of the elective. Other examples of learning included recognition

of different behaviours in other societies and an ability to link the behaviour to the theory e.g. student/teacher interactions vary across culture and demonstrate power distance.

One student echoed the statements of others when he said that Intercultural Studies had made him *"reassess what normal means"*. Other students stated that *"it opens your eyes to your own culture"* and you become *"equipped with skills to evaluate other societies and our own"* while they also stated that they *"valued our own culture more"*.

Students were asked to comment on the inclusion of particular concepts in various Intercultural Studies modules. A number of the modules place a lot of emphasis on the role of politics and geographic location in shaping the modern world. Feedback from third year students suggests that while some students were quite interested in history and politics, others found it difficult to understand. One student summarised this by saying *"the past of a country has an influence on the current situation"*. Others echoed this view, stating for example, that they had become more aware of *"connections between countries",* and *"how politics shapes societies"*. Broad concepts such as colonisation were also recognised in terms of one society forcing its culture, language etc. on another. A significant number of students stated that they had an awareness and understanding of the political spectrum and systems of government at home and abroad that they did not have previously and that they *"understood the news better"*. First year students, based on their experience of two modules, reported that they could understand political debates on TV that they could not have followed before, and that it encouraged them to read the newspaper.

Emphasis on culture, society and social change underpins many of the Intercultural Studies modules. Students responded to the questionnaire stating that they had an increased awareness and understanding of cultural differences. Examples cited included values, family life and women in the workforce. Social change theories were difficult to understand but helped *"prove that all cultures have their own norms"*. Respondents also stated that they had a better understanding of past and present generations, and a realisation of the influence of external factors on a society.

The final question asked of both first year and third year students was to explain how they would describe the Intercultural Studies electives to incoming first year students. Most of the responses from third year students

reinforced the information supplied throughout the questionnaires. General comments again referred to the belief that they are interesting electives that are about cultural awareness in Ireland and the wider world. They felt that they provided a break from "business" subjects and allowed an opportunity to learn about life. Students also expressed the belief that the electives were related to "*doing business*" and were made easier by the range of ways in which material was presented. While first year students only had the experience of two modules to draw on, they too noted the contrast with business subjects, the focus on culture and understanding in Ireland today and changes in Ireland. In general, students welcomed the opportunity offered in the modules to voice their own opinions.

Recommendations

   It is proposed that a new module, entitled Intercultural Competence, be introduced as a mandatory module for students of Business Studies. This reflects the requirements of employers in an increasingly multicultural work environment and offers graduates a specific, relevant and transferable skills set. This new module should set out a clear definition of Intercultural Competence, clear and measurable learning outcomes, and should investigate an appropriate model of assessment to measure as far as possible, the level of intercultural competence which students attain.
   The Intercultural Studies elective should continue to be offered to students in its current format with some adjustments taking students' feedback and employer needs into account. The active learning methodologies, with an emphasis on continuous assessment and reflective practice, should be enhanced to better reflect the proposed learning outcomes. Tutorial time could be used for project work to help first year students achieve deeper learning. Where possible, more guest speakers would be welcomed. Student learning could also be enhanced by developing their reflective writing skills. Active learning facilitates the development of intercultural competence.
   There is much potential to be explored in offering these modules on other programmes being delivered within the Institute; for example as

intensive Intercultural Awareness workshops, or as part of the fourth year level 8 programmes.

Outside the classroom, there is further scope for development. For example, a stock-taking exercise should be carried out in the Institute to find out the range and number of intercultural or cross cultural activities that take place which could be integrated into student learning (e.g. International Day, Chinese New Year, joint assessments between students from different cultures etc.).

Further research needs to be carried out to consider how best to measure students' intercultural competence and this knowledge and measurement tool needs to be integrated into the learning outcomes, delivery and assessment methods.

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