

Facilitating Local-International Student Interaction and Integration through Curriculum Development

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Abstract

This paper discusses ways in which student interaction and integration may be achieved through curriculum design. It approaches the challenge of local-international student interaction by addressing the shortcomings of traditional curriculum development that may not take into consideration the diversity of the student cohort adequately. The paper highlights and integrates important considerations for internationalisation with various key issues in curriculum development, including; rationale and philosophy behind the subject; aims and objectives; assessment structure; balance between content and skills; industry relevance and workload management.

The paper argues that internationalisation of the curriculum should also include ways in which engagement between domestic and international students may be facilitated. The paper uses the subjects taught by the author as key case examples and provides a critical analysis of the approach adopted.

Background

Internationalisation of Australian higher education is no longer seen as limited to the recruitment of international students, but includes the internationalisation of curriculum, and the development of mobile and skilled graduates and academics with the capacity to affect global change. Therefore, from a teaching and learning point of view, the internationalisation of a curriculum that assists in the development of globally mobile graduates who are interculturally competent and have cross-cultural communication skills and international perspectives in professional and civic life becomes particularly important (Leask, 2005). Treleaven, Freeman, Leask, Ramburuth, Simpson, Sykes and Ridings (2007) provided cogent discussions about the importance of and need for embedding intercultural communication within the curriculum of business faculties. They also showed the resources, support structures (communities of practice), policies needed to bring about internationalisation of the curriculum. Yet operationalisation of international education policies within institutions, including the internationalisation of curriculum continues to be a challenge for many academics. More importantly, curriculum that is designed to assist in improved interaction and integration between local and international students continues to be elusive to date.

As highlighted by Marginson (2007), international students and domestic students continue to suggest that there is minimal interaction across groups and cohorts, particularly within the classroom and educational context. In their study of the impact of international students on university life at three Victorian Universities, Marginson and Eijkman (2007, Executive Summary, p. 6) concluded:

“... the internationalisation of the curriculum content, and the potential pedagogical, curricular and other implications of greater diversity of national origins, native languages, cultural backgrounds and educational preparations in the student body, appear to be underdeveloped. Perhaps there were simply not the resources to create

more inventive approaches to pedagogies and curriculum in now more multi-cultural classrooms.”

While there has been attention to developing programs within student services that address issues of induction, orientation and communication (Collett, 2007; Briguglio, 2006) English language (Arkoudis, 2005), plagiarism and developing critical thinking skills (Larcombe, McCosker & O’Loughlin, 2007), there has been less work on exploring approaches building a curriculum that is internationalised and challenges students to develop multiple cross-cultural perspectives, which also improves interaction within classrooms between local and international students.

Currently, the work done around internationalising the curriculum in Australia tends to focus on the following themes; how to teach across cultures and international students how to include culturally inclusive curriculum; and the use of international case studies (Arkoudis, 2006; Ballard and Clanchy, 1997; Biggs, 1997, Chang, 2007). In addition, Ladd and Ruby (1999) and Kashima and Loh (2006) provide further insights into the adjustment and acculturation needs of international students. Whereas each of these is an important aspect of internationalising the curriculum, it continues to treat the cultural ‘other’ as separate and something that needs to be accommodated (as an adjunct) within the wider curriculum. This paper suggests that in order to develop truly international perspectives, a different approach might be needed, through examining the rationale and approach behind the subject; aims and objectives; balance between content and skills; assessment structure; industry relevance as well as student and staff workload management. It also assumes that intercultural engagement within the classroom is the responsibility of three parties; the facilitator (academic or teacher), the international student and the local students. This paper also recognises the heterogeneity in both cohorts of students (Morrison, Merrick, Higgs, & Le Métails, 2005) and argues that the nature of any such interaction is multi-faceted and should not be limited to an assumption of interaction between two clearly distinct groups of students, despite the title of the paper.

The paper uses examples from the author’s experience in building subjects within the interdisciplinary areas of business and project management, information and communication technologies (ICT), and information systems (IS) to indicate how domestic-international student engagement could be enhanced by the curriculum. Three subjects are discussed here which are Foundations of Information Systems (first year undergraduate), Organisational Analysis and Change (second year undergraduate), and Information Systems in an International Context (masters level). While all the subjects discussed have been delivered successfully and received positive feedback from both students and peer academics, a critical approach is taken as to what works and what does not work.

Rationale and Approach to subjects

The building of curriculum tends to begin with the rationale behind the subject being offered. Considerations include the year level of the subject, target students, industry needs, balance between content and generic skills (Ramsden, 2003). Therefore, to begin with, it was important to re-examine the rationale of the subject, subject aims and objectives, and what an academic might consider to be the ideal approach to their subject in terms ways to engage the students.

Challenges: Aims and Objectives

In building the three subjects, the biggest challenge was to actually consider what were the aims and objectives of the subject, as well as the generic skills that students may acquire from completion of the subject to ensure that they have portable skills in the international job market. Whereas it was clear to me that many of our students would eventually work with multinational or multicultural teams in their careers, it is seldom clear how best to prepare a diverse group of students for this eventuality. I wanted to be able to highlight some of the issues and theories for managing information systems in an international context, but also to balance that with some practical outcomes for the students. Therefore, in looking at the content of the subjects, it was important to include a range of topics that would satisfy the balance between relevant theories and skills.

Additionally, it was also just as important to include case studies from a broad range of cultures and countries, and include cross-cultural comparisons where possible. This was more than just providing cases and examples from different countries. The students were encouraged to think through why the cases and examples might be different or similar, reflecting the multiple approaches to similar problems. Students had to then be encouraged to reflect on their own preferred approaches to solving problems and why that was the case. Additionally, they should be encouraged to think through how they might or might not modify their approach or solution in different contexts.

Beyond the topics and examples used, I had to consider my rationale in designing the curriculum and what was driving the approach I was going to take in terms of conveying the topics to students. At the all levels, I wanted the curriculum to be:

- Challenging – giving students a range of readings that highlight different points of view about various concepts and ‘accepted Western wisdom’ on the topic of information systems and business management. This also included getting to students to ask difficult questions about their own accepted norms and frames of reference. Students should also be asked to think about the applicability of accepted concepts and theories in a global environment, and to share their thoughts with other students. The diversity of the student cohort can lend itself very constructively to such exercises, but only if all groups of students feel comfortable and are empowered to share their views. At the Masters level, this is particularly important as it can re-affirm students’ own work experiences.

Following suggestions from Toohey (1999), surface learning comes as a result of over coverage of issues and heavy workload. Therefore, it is important to focus on the key topics and to include more case studies and opportunities for students to explore the fewer issues in more depth. Additionally, I tend to include discussion on skills that are needed for managing across cultures into the curriculum to add some practical aspects to the students’ learning environment. At first year level, these skills tend to include cross-cultural communication and team work. At later year undergraduate levels, the skills would include different management styles across cultures. Finally, at the Masters level, the skills could include multicultural and international management competencies.

- Coherent – giving students a clear view of how the different topics fit together as a cohesive whole to assist them in dealing with the complex phenomenon of managing in an international context. Due to the fact that some of the topics in the subject will tend to be quite diverse, it is particularly important at the undergraduate level to provide a ‘road map’ or ‘mind map’ of how the different topics fit with each other. Providing clear themes throughout subjects can assist with coherence. In working with students from a diverse cohort, this point cannot be overlooked as often, students might not see the relevance of topics to each other. Often, this challenge is compounded by assessment questions that may tend to focus only on one or two topics at a time without asking students to relate across topics. The issue of coherence is discussed in more detail later in the paper.
- Relevant – giving students both the critical understanding of different cultural contexts, as well as some skills to manage potentially difficult situations. This could only be achieved with an understanding of the students’ prior experiences and what they may need in their professional lives. Therefore, part of the curriculum, in particular, tutorial discussions will have to be flexible and build on students’ current collective experience and ideas. Additionally, the assessment task should allow students to apply the concepts taught in the subject to their own experiences, to allow them to re-look at their past and current experiences, using different frameworks. Empowering international students to use their thoughts and experiences from their home countries was particularly important in ensuring an internationally relevant curriculum. For domestic students, it was just as important to get them to see that what is relevant ‘at home’ may not be relevant in other parts of the world. However, in looking at the question of relevance, students needed to be made aware of the dangers of stereotyping, and it was important to show diversity within cultures as well.

Furthermore, the question of relevance was also of particular importance in relation to the industries the students might be working in on graduation. Through possible industry involvement via guest lectures, industry reports and other reports on skills sets needed by employers, students are then shown the relevance of the content and skills taught in the subjects. This is usually where students start to see why it is important to work across cultures and with their fellow students from other cultures.

- Interesting – giving students work that is interesting and exciting, including case studies that articulate the complexities of managing internationally. This could include topics they might not otherwise read on a day to day basis and should provide them with interdisciplinary exposure. For example, at the Masters level, I also tended to give students some coverage of readings they might not otherwise access such as readings in areas of social and third world development through Information Communication Technologies (ICT) and the associated challenges. Like all other topics, this would draw on the latest research in the field and also industry reports where feasible. I could see from the start that some students might not see this as relevant to their immediate needs, and would have to balance this with the need for immediate relevance.

- Collaborative – Recognising that the cohort of diverse students is often a source of learning is particularly important in internationalising the curriculum. Therefore, the learning experience should be collaborative and opportunities have to be provided within the subject for students to interact and learn from each other. For collaborative efforts to work, it was important to devote resources to making inter-cultural interactions within classrooms work. However, whereas intercultural social engagement between diverse students have been part of a growing body of work and literature, their engagement within the classroom continues to be a challenge that has attracted less attention from researchers. Briguglio’s (2006) work is an exception to this view and provides some insights into the processes needed to facilitate intercultural collaboration between international and domestic students within the classroom.

Challenge: Content Structure

Across all three subjects, with a wide and relatively diverse range of topics, some past students found the topics covered in the subject disjointed. So, I had to think through how to make the topics more cohesive.

The idea then was to cluster topics into modules that broadly grouped diverse topics together under three main themes/modules. It was then important to show students how each module led on to the next and the intersections between the topics therein. This provided students with a better sense of the coherence of the topics and enabled them to take a more holistic approach to the subject. This also meant that in delivering the content, I will have to consciously link the topics of one module to the topics of the other modules. The reviews I received for the first draft of the document outlined the need to be clearer on the links between the modules from the very start. This made sense in that the whole point was for students to see the links between the modules. Therefore, I have included not just “what” the modules contain but also “why” and “how” they are linked to other modules within the curriculum under a *Lecture Program Summary* table which showed all the topics and modules on one page. Since the introduction of these measures, the subjects have received no complaints from students about any difficulty in linking topics.

Challenge: Assessment Design

In assessment design, it was particularly useful to refer to James and Baldwin’s (2002) *Nine Principles Guiding Teaching and Learning in the University of Melbourne* as a guide in addition to my own experience and preferences (See Appendix 1 for sample of the Principles). References were also made to a preliminary study by De Vita (2002) which showed some cultural differences in responses to different types of assessment. The key relevant considerations I had in designing the assessment included;

- Limited time frame within which students (including part-timers) have to work
- Diversity of the Students so that the assessment should reflect their individual developmental needs as well.
- Opportunities to learn from fellow students, and the creation of a vibrant learning environment (*following Principles 5 and 7*)
- Continual feedback where feasible (*following Principle 7*)

- Expectations should be made clear from the start and in subsequent one on one discussion with students (*following Principles 5, 6 and 7*)
- The assessment should be challenging and relevant to the students' experience, aligning with my approach to the subject

Research Essays

The use of research essays as a form of assessment is possible for all coursework students if it provides them with the opportunity to explore their field in a bit more depth by asking students to look at some research questions and find the answers to these questions (Badke, 2008). While broad questions around the relevant areas were set, students would then be asked to narrow down their 'research question' but will still have to cover a range of topics. This strategy was important so that students had the opportunity to apply their newly acquired knowledge from the subject as broadly as practicable. This was true for students at all levels. For first year students, it was also important to provide more guidance in refining research questions.

In determining the research question, I would also want the students to draw from their own experiences in working or living in international or multicultural contexts. This was stated clearly in the subject outline and I expected the students to work in consultation with their facilitators or tutors in choosing their research question. For the first year subject, I provided students with the opportunity to pose possible research question in the subject's online discussion forum. For the Masters students, research questions were refined in conjunction directly with me as a lecturer. This formed part of the ongoing feedback and student development which I believe to be a crucial part of the curriculum.

From the initial reviews, I also decided to modify the assessment criteria slightly to reflect and make more explicit, the subject objectives. This meant that instead of using '*critical use of literature*' as a criterion, I included '*Critical understanding of different cultural and international perspectives/frameworks and their applicability to cases or personal experience*'. It is a long criterion but reflects accurately and explicitly some of the key subject objectives. This criterion was also included for all other assessment tasks (presentation and peer reviews) for consistency and alignment across tasks.

Group Projects

According to the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) (2005), group work can contribute positively to students in terms of developing team work skills, communication skills and ability to work cooperatively. Additionally, an often recognised benefit of group work for academics and teachers is that it lessens the 'marking workload' and enables them to utilise their time more effectively.

Yet, managing group work is never an easy thing. From my experience with the subjects I have been involved in, Group projects is a process which has to be managed; from the setting of the group assignment, to the formation of groups, to management of groups to the assessment of the outcome. In recognising the complexity of group work Briguglio (2006) invested considerable resources into ensuring the groups in her project worked out well, but even then, the results were not always as expected. Some of the key lessons learned from developing successful group work conditions include the following;

Group Project Questions - Questions should be set with considerations for the content area being assessed but also for the different perspectives students from different cultures might take on the topics being assessed. Some questions tend to be culturally biased in that it presumes prior cultural knowledge of particular contexts. Therefore, if students are not from that particular context or have not been alerted to the context, they would not only be at a disadvantage in terms of dealing with the content, but would also not be in a position to contribute effectively to the group they are in. Where such questions are set, such students would not be valued as group members.

This also implies that group project questions can be engineered to value different perspectives, ideas and cultural contexts, thereby valuing inputs from a range of students. In my experience, where questions are set in such a manner, students tend to make a greater effort in looking for other students with diverse cultural knowledge to be part of their group.

Group Formation – The formation of groups can be highly dependent on the direction of the academic or facilitator within the classroom context. Left on their own, students are most likely to gravitate towards their friends and those students who they are most culturally similar to. On the other hand, forcing students from different cultures into artificial groups without providing them with the skills and context for working together can lead to conflict and freeloading (CSHE, 2005). Hence, in my subjects, I have had to provide students with time to develop real relationships across cultures within the seminar or tutorial setting through the early part of the semester. In addition, I usually spend no less than a whole tutorial/seminar for the actually group formation exercise. Students are asked to interact across cultures and group norming exercises are carried out, including ‘standing rules’ for the group and its members. The ‘standing rules’ include the consequences for non-performing members of the group, which all members sign-off on.

Group Management and Assessment - As shown by Briguglio (2006), much more could be done beyond the group formation, including providing students with the skills to negotiate, interact and communicate across cultures. These exercises often call for additional resources. Finally, the assessment should again reflect both the content being tested as well as recognition of the group process. If the Group project questions encompass the inclusion of cultural and global perspectives, then this has to be included as a key criterion in the assessment. Such practices do engender greater likelihood for interaction between cohorts of students as they begin to understand and see the need to work together and move beyond their comfort zone.

Peer Review and Presentation (Masters Level)

Peer reviews can provide an opportunity for students to learn from each other, including reading from areas beyond their own topics of interest. I believe that this was a crucial part of the curriculum, particularly at the Masters level, and provided students with the opportunity to learn from each other’s experience as well as understand the peer review process better. It also formed part of the ongoing feedback for students about their work (this time from peers as well as myself, as the lecturer). The implications here were that students needed to be given the skills to critique work beyond their own frame of reference. Students had to be provided with clear peer review criteria, which included the ‘cultural and global’ context within which the work is set. For example, students had to understand that a critique of a management

process in Melbourne, Australia might be different if a similar process is set in Wuhan, China, when doing their peer review of each other's preliminary work. I found that this exercise could drive some students to engage face-to-face with each other to find out why the similarities and differences might occur in different context, particularly among the more curious students.

The use of the peer review is attractive from a pedagogical standpoint but not necessarily so from a workload standpoint, as I discovered in previous years. Therefore, I had to decide how to use the peer review process constructively without overwhelming myself with work. Hence, I decided that like all independent peer review process, I will not take into account the peer reviews when making my own review/assessment of the students' preliminary work. In the final essay, I also did not assess if the student has incorporated or addressed all the questions raised by peer reviewers, on the understanding that students who addressed raised questions are likely to submit stronger final papers in any case (this might include ignoring spurious and irrelevant reviewer comments).

To further encourage dialogue between diverse students, I decided to include the presentations to give students the opportunity to discuss their work with the class. It provides peer reviewers with the opportunity to ask questions as well as yet another opportunity to learn from each other. I completely understand that this may be a stressful exercise for some students. However, at the Masters level, I hoped that the students would rise to the challenge (which they did).

Timing and Workload

Ramsden (2003) and Toohey (1999) discuss the importance of not having excessive workload for the students as this can only promote surface learning. One of my challenges in designing the assessment was to be very careful about how much I was asking the students to do. One of the things I have done with all subjects was to ensure that most of the readings that are required are at an acceptable volume, so that students would still have time to reflect on the readings, and also have time to engage with the material on a deeper level and are provided with the opportunity to share their reflections. I am a firm believer that if students spend all their time reading, they would have no time to talk to other students about what they have read.

Facilitating Local-International Interaction student interaction

Facilitating interaction across cultures is not an exact science. Scholars, academics, human resource experts and diplomatic negotiators throughout time have tried to get people to work together, interact and integrate. The failures have been spectacular and the recent successes have been expensive. Primarily, the old adage that "You can lead a horse to the water but you cannot make it drink" is very true of cross-cultural interaction. People from different cultures find it difficult to interact with each other for various reasons (Gudykunst, 2004), including preference to operate within their comfort zone, their tolerance for ambiguity, anxiety, lack of information about the other, lack of opportunity or simple laziness. Rather, successful interaction between international and local student relies almost on the law of averages, which is to say, that if you provide the students with enough opportunities and inducements, they are more likely to interact than not. The alternative is to leave the students to their own devices in this aspect, which has not produced any discernable positive outcomes in the past.

This paper argues that by constructing a curriculum that provides opportunities, relevant contextual knowledge, skills and inducements to interact across cultures, students from diverse cultures are less likely to continue to ignore the need to talk to each other. The academic or facilitator has the potential to influence interaction and integration between diverse cohorts of students through carefully designed curriculum.

Conclusion

The biggest challenge in this curriculum development exercise was ensuring that the assessment was in alignment with what I set out to achieve in the aims and objectives which included enhanced interaction between international and local students. Coming to realise that the process of the assessment, including how students might go about completing their individual assignments as well as their group work, was as important as the final deliverables was enlightening for me. It has strengthened my belief that curriculum is as much about the process as it is about the content of the subject. Hence, a lot of thought was put into the assessment process, the timing of the deliverable tasks, the modularisation of the topics and the alignment of these aspects of the curriculum to the initial rationale and philosophy of having a curriculum that is challenging, coherent, relevant, interesting and collaborative, and in that process, increasing the interaction levels and integration between local and international students.

In conclusion, the students in the class over the years have indicated an increase in their understanding of how businesses and ICT may differ across cultures, recognised some of the cross-cultural similarities and differences. Students are also more engaged with each other in that more and more, students are choosing to work in groups that have both international and local students. While the level of interaction has yet to reach that which is desired by many who promote the benefits of international education, there is certainly an anecdotal increase from the students' report and from their feedback on whether they felt a part of the greater group of students working in the subjects discussed.

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Appendix 1: Extract of *Nine Principles Guiding Teaching and Learning in the University of Melbourne* (James, R. & Baldwin, G., 2002)

<p>Principle 5: Explicit concern and support for individual development</p>	<p>Students learn in different ways and at different rates, and their understanding varies considerably according to personality, background and particular talents. This variation contributes to creativity and the generation of new knowledge. Within this variation, however, all students benefit from individual attention and deserve to receive assistance in developing their understandings. Such assistance must be based on insights into student backgrounds, what they are aiming for and the nature of any difficulties they encounter.</p>
<p>Principle 6: Clear academic expectations and standards</p>	<p>Clarity of expectations is the first stage in the learning cycle, an essential precursor to the provision of feedback on individual progress and the assessment of learning. Students benefit from an understanding of the journey and destination that lies ahead, including both the subject-specific and generic skill development that is anticipated. The provision of clear expectations in higher education does not imply, however, that student development or creativity should be constrained by overly detailed prescriptions, or requirements narrowly formulated only in terms of tasks to be completed.</p> <p>In most universities, student diversity has re-focused attention on the need to inform students explicitly about what is expected of them and of what they can do to be successful. In practical terms this attention has meant not merely providing students with lists of aims and objectives, but also permeating the day-to-day teaching and learning with discussion of intentions, purposes and desired outcomes. While an excessive focus on assessment requirements is undesirable, assessment tasks that are designed and scheduled in appropriate ways are an especially powerful means of confirming the expected learning outcomes.</p>
<p>Principle 7: Learning cycles of experimentation, feedback and assessment</p>	<p>For effective learning to occur, students need the opportunity to articulate and test their understandings and to receive informed and constructive feedback. The process of learning in higher education involves iterative loops of this kind and is enhanced by both the frequency and quality of the feedback given. During these learning cycles, students need some freedom to experiment with knowledge without the educational process in its entirety becoming one of 'trial and error'.</p>