

Internationalisation at Home: Building cross-cultural understanding among local and international students through enhanced teaching and learning practices in The Victoria Business School, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Commons, Karen
Student Learning Support Service
Victoria University of Wellington
Wellington, New Zealand
Email: Karen.Commons@vuw.ac.nz

Mabin, Vicky
Victoria Business School
Victoria University of Wellington
Wellington, New Zealand
Email: Vicky.Mabin@vuw.ac.nz

Gao, Xiaodan
Student Learning Support Service
Victoria University of Wellington
Wellington, New Zealand
Email: Xiaodan.Gao@vuw.ac.nz

Abstract

Cognisant of a need to produce graduates who can function well in a global workplace, today's business schools face the teaching and learning challenge of developing international and cross-cultural perspectives and understandings among students. At Victoria University of Wellington we recognise that we have extensive diversity among our students and staff, and so we have begun to reflect on how to use this diversity as a classroom resource in order to develop such understandings. This paper describes a project that tried various ways of helping our diverse students learn from each other in classroom settings within our university's business school. Our project has found that experiential-learning interventions in classrooms can help develop cross-cultural perspectives. However, such interventions need to be closely tied to curricula and perceived as valuable by students.

Keywords

International and inter-cultural perspectives, internationalisation at home, relational participation, diversity as a classroom resource

Introduction

An understanding of globalisation and its impacts is essential for business students in today's tertiary institutions. Business schools are realising that curricula need to reflect this theme, and they are also reflecting on ways to prepare their graduates to do business in a culturally diverse workplace once they complete their qualifications. In short, one of the key challenges in teaching and learning in today's business schools is how to develop international and cross-cultural perspectives and understandings among students. This paper discusses one way of developing these perspectives and understandings within the classroom. At Victoria University of Wellington, we know we have extensive diversity among students and staff, so we decided to use this existing diversity as a classroom resource. This paper primarily reflects on classroom interventions. A broader description of the overarching project that these interventions relate to is given in Mabin, Commons, Gao and Plimmer (2012). For the purposes of this paper, 'cross-cultural perspectives' are defined as those viewpoints, attitudes, and values that are socially learned and that affect individuals' behaviour. These perspectives do not necessarily derive from identity with a nation, but they also derive from identity with other populations such as ethnic group, religion, and region. The authors are careful not to generalise reported perspectives to specific

populations. They recognise that even where the above identifiers hold, differences among families and individual personality also influence how people view their world.

This paper outlines the background literature that helped us create a theoretical model, it describes and evaluates our teaching and learning interventions, and finally, it summarises what we have learned. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the discussion of how best to ‘internationalise at home’. Given the exploratory and evolving nature of our project, this paper does not purport to describe and analyse systematically collected research data.

The classroom is an ideal place for students to develop cultural awareness

Many educators believe that the development of multi-cultural perspectives will be facilitated by what is often labelled as ‘the internationalisation’ of our institutions. Knight (2004) defines ‘internationalisation’ as ‘a process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education’. Recently, Caruana and Hanstock (2008) have given thought to the current state of internationalisation of teaching and learning in our tertiary institutions. They state that institutions can be placed along a development continuum that stretches from ‘technical observance’ to ‘relational participation’. They show how institutions move from technically observing internationalisation by bringing in international students and staff, and adding activities, such as extra-curricular clubs and activities—to ‘relational participation’, where institution members begin to build true relationships with each other and realise that there is something to be gained for all from the internationalisation drive. Their key question, however, is **how** do institutions move to best practice in relational participation. Caruana (2010) believes that the curriculum has a significant role to play. She believes that the three key principles of the internationalised curriculum are inclusion, understanding of multiple perspectives, and development of cross-cultural capability.

Other authors also point out that internationalisation of the curriculum is more than simply learning about other cultures or responding to global conditions. Leask (2010) believes that the curriculum should provide local students with the opportunity to reflect on their own identity. She states that internationalisation of the curriculum is related to knowledge of ourselves and our own culture as much as to our knowledge of other cultures. Leask, together with colleagues at several Australian universities, through an Australian Learning and Teaching Council-funded project, has developed a set of resources (see Freeman, et al. 2009), including a chart depicting the development of inter-cultural capability for an individual (see Appendix 1). This chart provides a useful schematic of two dimensions: the first dimension being the development of knowledge, attitudes, and skills; the second dimension being progression from awareness through understanding to autonomous behaviour. Bourne (2011) takes this discussion a stage further and reflects on what should happen at institutional level. Bourne believes institutions need to think hard about what a global institution is. She cites Tormey’s 2006 work which states that institutions should not impose their own views, lifestyles, and forms of knowledge, but should create spaces where others can examine the local values and priorities in a safe, enjoyable, equal, and productive relationship. Leask, Bourne, and Tormey have clearly moved beyond the technical observance stage and are exploring how Caruana and Hanstock’s ‘relational participation’ might look.

Some authors discuss types of interventions that are most suitable for effective internationalisation of the curriculum. Leask and Carroll (2011) believe institutions need to implement ‘strategic and informed interventions’ in order to improve inclusion and engagement and enable all students to benefit from the diversity on their campuses. They state that institutions need to ‘align the informal and the formal curriculum’, to ‘focus on task design and management’, and to find ‘new approaches to professional development’ for academic staff. They also stress the need for ongoing reflection on the effectiveness of interventions. Thom (2010, cited in Leask 2010), believes that thoughtful internationalisation of the curriculum will bring about transformation among its members. This transformation takes place where difference is tolerated and respected in institutional culture and where individuals are required to think and act outside their comfort zone in a supportive environment. Two Australian academics, Anita Mak and Michelle Barker, currently have an Australian Teaching and Learning Council grant (ALTC 2010) to investigate how best to ‘internationalise at home’ using interventions in learning that are drawn from their research-validated ‘ExcelL: Excellence in experiential learning and leadership programme’ (Mak, Westwood, Ishiyama & Barker 1999). ExcelL is a programme that teaches cross-cultural communication. It uses experiential learning techniques and encourages international students to step outside their familiar way of behaving in order to learn the communication competencies necessary for success in a new environment. Mak and Barker’s ExcelL programme has been taught at Victoria University of Wellington for six years, and evaluations show that students who participate (international as well as local students) gain increased confidence. International students who participate report that their interaction with people from different cultures increases (Commons & Gao 2011).

It was this ExcelL programme that provided the stimulus for the ‘Internationalisation at Home’ project that is the subject of this paper. A group of academics from Victoria’s Business School trained to be facilitators of the programme and in doing so, became interested in how the programme could be used in the classroom to develop intercultural competencies of all students.

Victoria University has significant cultural diversity

While Victoria Business School staff had been reflecting on the usefulness of initiatives like ExcelL, they had also been reflecting on the diverse nature of their school, and whether this could be used to develop students’ global perspectives. In 2010, senior academics Mabin and Brocklesby had begun research that would give them a clear picture of the international experience and background of both staff and students in the faculty. They had developed surveys for each group (Mabin & Brocklesby 2010b). The student survey was administered to 300-level students in December 2010 (and again in December 2011), and the staff survey was administered in May 2011. The survey results confirmed the level of diversity they had expected. Of the 501 student respondents to their survey, they found that 45% had lived in another country at some time in their lives, and fewer than 5% had never travelled overseas. A total of 28% were born outside New Zealand and 51% had close family from abroad. Among staff respondents, 62.5% were born overseas and more than 50% had studied abroad.

With knowledge of this diversity in mind, and with a strong interest in ExcelL and its applications, Senior Learning Advisers, Commons and Gao; and Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning, Mabin, decided to undertake action research to find out how best to use this diversity as a classroom resource in order to develop international and cross-cultural perspectives. We extended a conceptual model from Mabin and Brocklesby (2010). This model (see Figure 1) focuses on:

- using the existing diversity as a resource in our classrooms
- building relationships among members as part of a learning community
- thoughtful reflection.

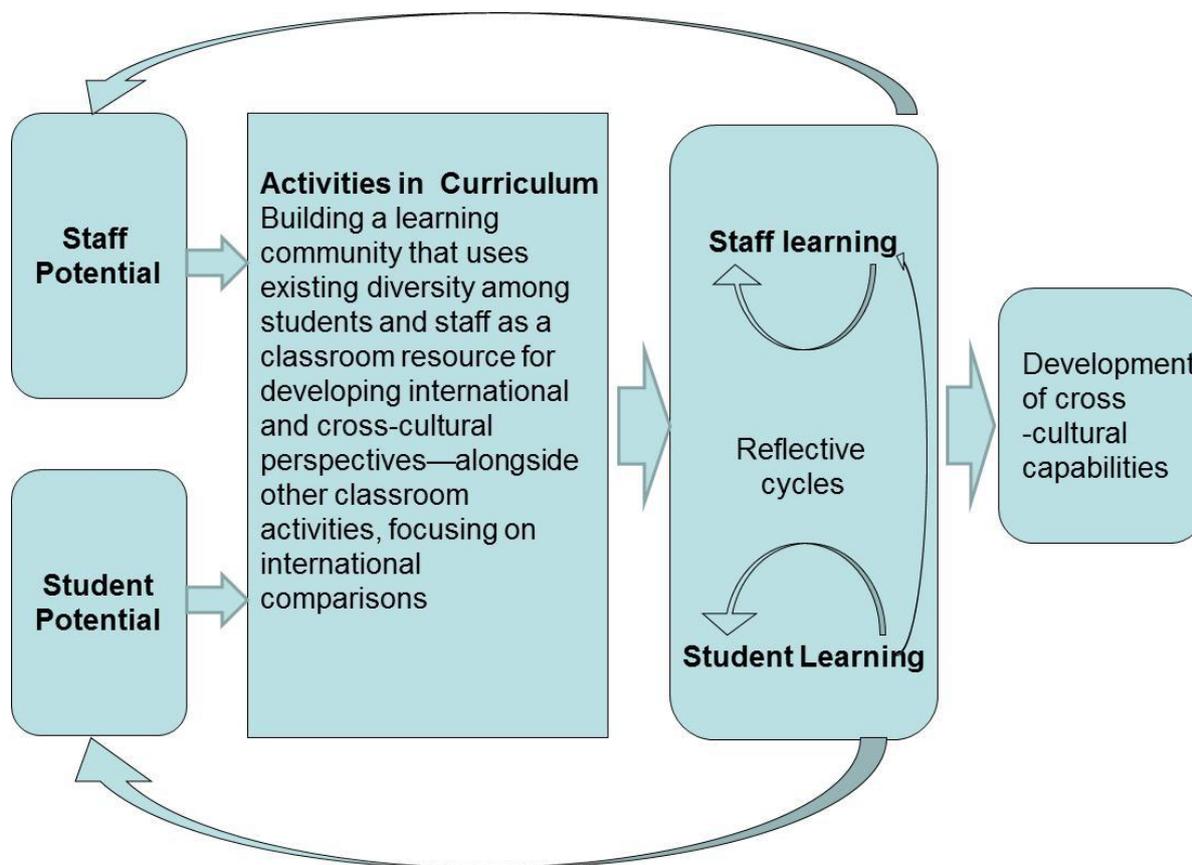


Figure 1: Developing a substantive international experience—a model adapted from Mabin and Brocklesby (2010a)

From the model and the survey results, we decided on three strands for our action research. We undertook to:

- create safe, inclusive environments in our first year tutorials: environments where students would feel comfortable, valued, and ready to participate fully
- run teaching and learning interventions in second and third-year classes where we would use experiential learning techniques
- ask students and staff at Victoria how to run more effective groupwork.

This paper documents the second of these strands.

Experiential learning can draw on cultural diversity

In one second and two third year classes, learning advisers worked alongside several academic staff members to run experiential learning activities designed to develop cross-cultural awareness and international perspectives. These activities were based on the Excell (Excellence in experiential learning and leadership) Programme. In each intervention, staff pointed out at the start of class that they were seeking to enable students to share their different cultural views, behaviours, and values. They were careful to tell students that when a country, region, ethnic group, industry, etc were mentioned, it was important not to generalise the information shared as relating to everybody in that country, region, ethnic group, etc. Staff made it clear that perspectives and behaviours are developed in many ways, and ethnicity, religion, family, life experiences, individual personalities all come into play. In making this statement, staff were acknowledging that culture is a very broad term and that generalisations linking culture with nationality are just that—generalisations to which there are always exceptions, but helpful nonetheless if treated as such.

Intervention in a third-year Human Resource Management and Industrial Relations class

Objectives of this intervention were:

- to help students identify and analyse their own cultural perspectives and behaviours relating to performance issues and pay rise requests
- to provide awareness and some understanding of different cultural perspectives relating to performance issues and pay rise requests

The authors of this paper worked with the lecturer of this course to create a 2-hour session where students (approximately 80) engaged in experiential learning related to seeking a pay rise. The class was discussing gender and cultural barriers to pay equity. First, the lecturer gave a 20-minute presentation on gender and culture and how these relate to employment issues. Next, we asked students to form co-national groups and asked each group to create a roleplay of an employee asking for a pay rise within their own national context. Students were asked to consider cultural values as they created their roleplay. Where students found that such a request would not naturally occur within their own cultures, we asked them to think instead about the reasons why this would be inappropriate in their culture. Next, representative groups presented their roleplays (or explanations of why the behaviour was inappropriate) to the class. For each presentation, students noted the ‘words used’, ‘body language’, and ‘underlying values’, using the ‘cultural map’ template, (see Appendix 2) from the earlier-mentioned Excell programme. After each roleplay, the class questioned the representative group about behaviours, words, and values in order to understand how and why people in different cultures behave the way they do.

As the class was mostly made up of local students, we recruited other nationalities to come along to the class and help with the activity. We mostly recruited from the Victoria International Leadership Programme, a programme to develop leadership and cross-cultural communication among international students. We did this recruitment in advance of the session, and managed to bring in additional students from Cambodia, Malaysia, Africa, Germany, and Russia. These extra students were carefully briefed as to their role and the objectives of the experiential exercise.

Outcomes

The lecturer commented that:

The session helped build connections amongst class members, and linked theory to practice. Unfortunately many international students were absent that day, and it did not build engagement with those students as planned. It did bring cross-cultural material to life.

Student comments were collected anecdotally as well as in an end-of-trimester evaluation. Responses were mixed, some of the anecdotal comments saying ‘drop it’, some of the evaluation comments saying they found it useful. These latter commenters were asked how the intervention had helped them learn. Some of their comments were:

- *I found the exercise extremely interesting and useful. It helped me learn the differences and similarities in interactions between countries and cultures. If I travel overseas with HRM (Human Resource Management), I will surely remember the exercise!*
- *The fact that we had people from those countries get up in front of the class and talk and also how we had to get into groups ourselves and really think about how New Zealand culture works. It was hands on and I like that sort of learning—it was easy to relate to.*
- *The extent of the differences between the cultures, the subtleties and the interpretations of different words/ actions and what is and isn’t appropriate in other countries. Doing this in this class is the only time in 3yrs at Victoria University that something has been done to encourage interaction and understanding regarding international and domestic students. The rest of the interaction I have had with international students is because I seek them out to have them in group projects, and to speak with them in tutorials/lectures. I think they need to be welcomed more by the domestic students, and made to feel at home, not like outsiders as they sometimes do.*
- *It got my attention, interesting and just seeing how the people interacted was memorable. A lot better than being told by a lecturer or text book.*
- *Understanding why other people might act in certain ways which might be perceived weird for someone that comes from a different culture.*
- *The actual differences that you don’t find out from textbooks.*

Intervention in a second-year International Business class

Objectives of this intervention were:

- to help students identify and analyse their own cultural perspectives and behaviours relating to business practice
- to provide awareness and some understanding of different cultural perspectives relating to business practice
- to help students begin to value other cultural ways of doing things.

The authors of this paper and two lecturers ran an experiential learning activity during a 50-minute lecture slot with a class of 120–130 students. The course is an introduction to international business, and the course coordinator was keen to develop some awareness and understanding of cultural difference early on in his course. This intervention took place in week 4 of trimester.

We divided the class into four large groups, ensuring that each large group had at least two pairs of students from countries other than New Zealand. Each facilitator took one of these large groups away to a booked space. Once in the designated space, students were asked to pair up with a co-national and prepare a role play according to scenario cards. (These scenario cards involved refusing an invitation to meet and discuss a proposed business collaboration.) Students then presented these roleplays to the group. The group filled out cultural map templates and questioned those roleplaying in order to understand fully the different cultural behaviours and values relating to this scenario. The group asked questions such as:

- ‘Why did you do...?’
- ‘What cultural values are you possibly adhering to?’
- ‘Do you think your behaviour is representative of your culture?’

Finally the whole group did a quick pair-share and feedback to the group on ‘What I learned from this activity’.

Outcomes

The course coordinator reported that:

The activity gave students a personal experience in confronting different cultures. Although a few students (like international students) may have had a similar experience previously, their understanding in this respect could be intuitive and implicit, and I believe the well-organised activity helped them to further their knowledge of cross-cultural literacy. For instance, students from the US and Europe said that they did not realise how ‘quiet

and shy' some New Zealand students were, and one Kiwi student who lived in the US for years noticed himself as a combination of both cultures. There were also many other interesting examples from the Asian-Kiwi cultural groups. Importantly, I noticed that students tried to explain the different behaviours by applying Hofstede's cultural dimensions—something they learned in lectures. This was great from the learning point of view.

Overall, for a 50-minute activity, I think it was well organised and executed. There is no doubt that it enhanced students' understanding of cultural difference and encouraged students how they perhaps should respond to the differences.

The other course lecturer added that:

My group of students in the exercise really enjoyed it and seemed to appreciate the opportunity to learn about others' cultures and behaviours. They took an active and intelligent interest.

On the day, individual students commented that they liked the active learning and change to routine.

Intervention in a third-year International Business class

Objectives of this intervention were:

- to provide active, experiential learning about cross-cultural communication
- to create an integrated community of learners
- to use international students as resources in the classroom as an attempt to internationalise our curriculum.

Here the authors of this paper ran an interactive session in a third-year International Business class of about 40 students. Students were working on GEE: Global Enterprise Experience (<http://www.geebiz.org/>). In order to prepare them for their role as leaders in their GEE teams, the lecturer thought it would be good to raise awareness of cultural differences towards leadership and teamwork. At the start of the session, we told students we were going to do an activity that would help them become more aware of cultural differences in team behaviour. We asked them to try to take off their cultural blinkers (or lenses) and be open to what they were to observe. We brought in pairs of students from several cultures and used some of the international students in the class. We asked our different cultural pairs to roleplay a scenario relating to giving feedback. The scenario related to a noisy neighbour and a request for less noise at night in order to sleep well.

After the series of roleplays, we asked students what they'd noticed. We elicited information for a continuum that we put on the whiteboard—showing individualistic behaviours at one end and collectivist behaviours at the other. Next we asked students to brainstorm challenges these cultural differences might pose for their leadership role in the GEE programme. Finally we had students brainstorm solutions to these challenges.

Outcomes

The staff member present at the session said that the intervention

...forced the students to interact and this is something that some were uncomfortable with; moreover, the way the interaction took place added a cross-cultural perspective.

The course coordinator reported:

The feedback from the students was positive. They particularly valued the exercise when it came to their direct experiences with multicultural groups in the GEE.

Some of the international students who had participated in the roleplays told us they had learned a lot.

Experiential learning interventions seem to have been useful

We did not formally evaluate these interventions, so we do not have firm evidence of their efficacy in terms of student learning. However, in line with the third focus of our model, 'reflective cycles', we did ask the four staff involved to reflect on the usefulness of the interventions (see Appendix 3 for questions). All gave some favourable comments. The lecturer from the human resources paper said 'The session helped build connections amongst class members'. This comment resonated with us as it seemed to accord with Caruana and Hanstock's (2008) idea of 'relational participation' mentioned earlier. The course coordinator of the second intervention also possibly refers to 'relational participation' when she says that even if students have had experiences of 'confronting different cultures' previously, understandings could still be 'intuitive and implicit'. She says that this 'well organised activity helped [students] to further their knowledge of cross-cultural literacy'. This course coordinator seems to be valuing the way the experiential and relational nature of the intervention developed

cross-cultural understandings among her students. The class lecturer of the second intervention also alludes to the fact that students gained a personal experience: 'My group of students in the exercise really enjoyed it and seemed to appreciate the opportunity to learn about others' cultures and behaviours. They took an active and intelligent interest'.

Staff believed that the activities also provided opportunities for student learning. The human resources lecturer said that the activity 'linked theory to practice...It did bring cross-cultural material to life'. The course coordinator of the second intervention said, 'Importantly, I noticed that students tried to explain the different behaviours by applying Hofstede's cultural dimensions—something they learned in lectures. This was great from the learning point of view'. As academics interested in teaching and learning, these comments were interesting for us. In these interventions, students were applying theory; they were hopefully critiquing it too. Hofstede, who is sometimes discredited among business school academics (Baskerville-Morley 2005), was being critiqued by students who had a real-life reference group.

Some of the staff feedback was thought provoking. The human resources lecturer commented on the strong need to maintain relevance to the curriculum and to ensure students understood the purpose of such activities. The intervention in his class was followed by an essay where students needed to consider the impact of cross-cultural difference on human resource management. As learning advisers we know that students need to know why they are doing something in order to value it. The lecturer's link to curriculum objectives and assessment helped validate our intervention. The lecturer present at the third intervention (in the third-year International Business class) said that the intervention 'forced the students to interact and this is something that some were uncomfortable with'. This comment possibly shows that the intervention took students outside their comfort zone and provided opportunities for a transformative learning of the type mentioned by Thom (2010, cited in Leask, 2010).

The comment from the lecturer at the third intervention might help explain some of the student reflections that we collected. As mentioned earlier, we asked students for feedback both after the classes as well as in end-of-trimester surveys. Their feedback was mixed. Some students indicated they would like the activity dropped while others indicated it was useful. We do not know why students wanted the activity dropped, but it is possible that some of the negative responses were related to lack of comfort in participating in new and experiential learning activities. Caruana, Clegg, Ploner, Stevenson, and Wood (2011) advise that to create resilient thinkers of the future, we need to take students outside of their 'comfort zones of learning' and put them into 'contact zones of learning'. It seems that students might not realise the value of such learning, however, and given that such activities might feel uncomfortable, they might evaluate them negatively.

Another important consideration relating to evaluation of our interventions relates to the nature of evaluation questions themselves. Given that our objective is to create an integrated community of learners, we should be using evaluation techniques that measure attitudinal and behavioural change rather than simple evaluation forms that request a tick against 'like' or 'dislike' the activity. We are currently seeking more effective ways to measure the usefulness of our interventions.

Of those students who found the interventions useful, some found the experiential learning impactful. One student commented, 'seeing how the people interacted was memorable'. Another said, 'It was hands on'. Some felt they learned more when using the diversity in the room as resource: 'I had many students in my class who were from overseas and they provided multiple perspectives'; another valued learning 'the actual differences that you don't find out from textbooks'. Tran (2012) of RMIT states that interventions that 'enable students to integrate their cultural resources in learning...makes explicit to local students the values brought by international students'. During our classroom interventions, many international students seemed to welcome the opportunity to share their perspectives. When we called for volunteers to do roleplays in front of a class, we found international students from different backgrounds prepared to do this activity. Tran (2012) states that international students who are not asked to share their different perspectives 'often feel ignored, marginalised and disengaged for not sharing the Australian contextual knowledge privileged in the classroom'. It is our experience that enabling international students to participate actively and to share their perspectives enhances their experience and engagement because they are more likely to feel included in a learning community.

As well as asking staff and students to reflect, we did some reflection of our own. A possible oversight in one of the third-year classes related to students' self-reflection. We did not give students the opportunity to reflect on their own cultural behaviours before we presented new perspectives from students of other cultures. As stated earlier in this paper, Leask (2010) believes we should provide local students with the opportunity to reflect on their own identity. She states that internationalisation of the curriculum is related to knowledge of ourselves and our own culture as much as to our knowledge of other cultures.

Some observers of our work have suggested that students from some cultures might not feel comfortable sharing their perspectives if the staff involved in the intervention are not from their culture, or if they feel 'minoritised'

within their own country. We are continuing to consider this issue. We work hard to create a safe, inclusive, respectful environment in each classroom we enter. We ask students to recognise that they have automatic cultural lenses and automatic tendencies to evaluate or judge others. We ask them to try to give up these thoughts and automatic judgements and listen from a place of ‘not good or bad, right or wrong, but just different’. In future interventions we will make it clear that students can choose whether or not to share their perspectives with the wider group. Students who feel uncomfortable talking to others about how things happen in their world can opt out of class sharing and simply listen to others.

What we have learned overall

These interventions seem to have had varying levels of success. A key factor to continue considering is the creation of a safe and inclusive learning community where students can begin to identify the characteristics of their own cultural behaviours and values as well as those of their peers and other members of their institution. Hopefully the first strand of our overarching project (where we help tutors create related learning community in first-year tutorials) will lay the ground work for successful teaching and learning interventions (such as those outlined in this paper) in students’ later years. We have learned that all interventions must have perceived relevance in line with the curriculum, and preferably be directly linked to assessment. We have realised that we need to do more formal pre- and post-assessment for attitudinal and behavioural learning as this would give a clearer indication of the usefulness of such interventions. If staff are to be encouraged to incorporate more of these activities in their classrooms, they need clear evidence of efficacy in terms of student learning. They also need practical demonstration of teaching methods and lots of support, especially in the initial stages.

Overall, the interventions described have proved to be more beneficial than not, and are providing an element that is not being provided elsewhere in the curriculum. As such we see merit in continuing to develop such interventions in a wider range of disciplines.

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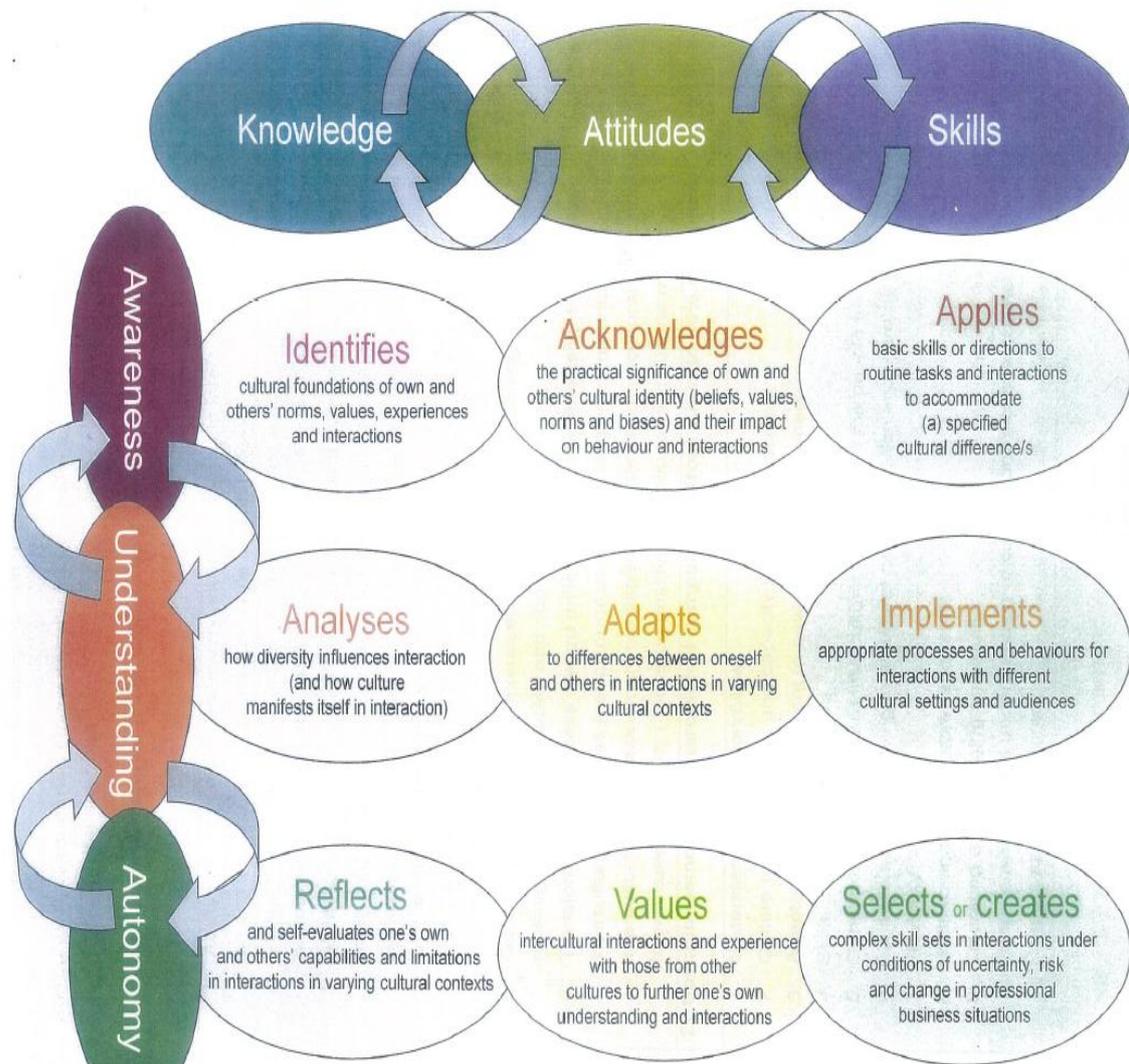
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Appendix 1: Developing intercultural competence (Ridings, Simpson, Leask, et al 2008, cited in Freeman, et al. 2009)



Developing intercultural competence

Ridings Simpson Leask et al 2008

Appendix 2: Cultural map template

Competency: Making a request

Scenario: Asking for a pay rise

Country	Words	Body Language	Cultural Value

Adapted from Barker & Mak (2008)

Appendix 3: Survey of staff involved in ExcelL-based teaching and learning interventions

In trimester one, Xiaodan and I worked with you on an ExcelL-based intervention in your class. Please can you answer the following questions. Make sure you are very truthful! We won't be offended if you are negative. We need to know what works and what doesn't.

1. Was the ExcelL-based intervention in your trimester one class useful or not useful (from a teaching and learning perspective)?

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2. In what way was it useful/not useful?

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3. Would you do it again? If so, would you modify it and how?

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4. Would you recommend other staff do similar interventions if the resources were available, ie, help from SLSS/other ExcelL-trained staff?

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5. If we promote interventions like these in classes, what issues/barriers/challenges for staff should we expect?

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6. How do you think these issues/barriers/challenges could be overcome?

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Many thanks

Karen and Xiaodan

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