

ISANA INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

24th Annual Conference, Sofitel, Brisbane Central, 3 to 6 December, 2013

Theme: Comprehensive Internationalisation of the Campus

Sub Theme: Harnessing productive diversity within institutions

Non-refereed paper

Title: Connecting International and Domestic Students at La Trobe Melbourne: A Comparison of three activities

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Full Paper

Introduction

Tremendous diversity in nationality backgrounds of students exists at the Melbourne campus of La Trobe University; however, to harness the diversity productively to benefit international and domestic students is not always an easy task. To promote interaction between the two cohorts of students, La Trobe Melbourne has succeeded to a certain degree with three activities which will be outlined in this paper. These activities are: orientation tours of the university campus, a buddy program and small group conversations. After the description of each one of them, an attempt is made to show the similarities and differences among these activities.

Background

La Trobe Melbourne is a pathway college on the Melbourne campus of La Trobe University. Currently it has one thousand students, two hundred of whom are domestic students. About 50% of the students are studying English language, and the rest are in the Foundation Studies and Diploma program. The students in the Diploma program at La Trobe Melbourne are studying subjects offered in the first year of the undergraduate degrees at La Trobe University.

The tradition of bringing together Australian and international students started about twenty years ago when the place was called La Trobe University Language Centre. The original idea arose from international student surveys in which students requested the opportunity to meet with university students, at the end of the survey, in other comments.

One may say that it would be ideal if each one of the two hundred domestic students in the present day college, that is La Trobe Melbourne, became a "buddy" of at least four international students enrolled here. This would be an easy solution to our effort of getting them to interact. However, such arrangements are possible only in an ideal world. The future plan is to utilise the diversity within La Trobe Melbourne; in the meantime, the tradition of engaging University students to interact with pathway students continues at orientation, in a buddy program and in small group conversations.

Orientation Tours of the University Campus

At the start of each ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) term, one of the activities that the new students engage in is a group tour of the University campus. Each group is made up of ten to fifteen students, and they are with

an Australian student from La Trobe University. At first they get in a group and introduce themselves and then the University student explains what the schedule to be followed is for the next two hours. The group, after that, then goes off on a walking tour of the campus.

This is the first chance for many international students to meet an Australian of their own age, at close range, with whom they can exchange a few words and listen to for about two hours. On good weather days they may even get to see a kangaroo or two at the wild life park on the campus. After the walking tour of the campus, some of the international students may get together to have a coffee with the University student or go to the bistro. Many international students do neither.

Sometimes, the tour leaders bring LTM students back to Student Support staff members to explain the difficulties, in finding suitable accommodation or negotiating public transport, which the new students could be facing.

Buddy Program

This program at La Trobe Melbourne is not available to all students but is specially tailored for students from partner universities who may request this for their group or exchange students. The students who request this are required to pay a separate fee, additional to tuition fees. The amount they pay is related to the choices they make on the activities list. They may choose 20 hours of activities, ranging from free ones on the campus to AFL games at MCG or Australian Open Tennis (depending upon the time of the year). Each group has three to five students from La Trobe Melbourne with an Australian student from La Trobe University. The Australian student is reimbursed for transport and meal costs on the days of the activities, especially on going to listen to bands playing at venues in the City, trips to the Great Ocean Road and Phillip Island.

Even after careful planning of request choices and arrangements made, feedback from international students reveal that shopping in Melbourne City is the most popular activity.

Small Group Conversations

The conversation groups are held at present in the Independent Learning Centre at La Trobe Melbourne. Each group is supposed to have one University student and five La Trobe Melbourne students. However, due to the popularity of these groups, the size of the groups has grown. Therefore, more groups have been created. Each session is for one hour.

The topics have been chosen by the University students, for example, Indigenous Australia and places in Victoria of interest to tourists. Each week a certain paralinguistic skill is introduced and developed by practice.

Feedback from students has registered that the fun element is the most enjoyable part of this exercise. There is a lot of laughter involved.

Similarities

All La Trobe University students have been recruited via the careers@latrobe portal. Some of the students have worked on all three programs. When the present participants graduate, new LTU students are recruited to take their place. Interviews and induction are conducted by "senior" students on the activity programs. The students who continue for up to three years or longer have either done LOTE subjects at University or have life partners who are from a different language background to them. Police check and Working with Children check are required. Some students have professional references

or testimonials but others do not as this is their first job. Most students ask a staff member from La Trobe Melbourne involved on these programs to become a referee for further employment elsewhere, especially after graduation.

The University students are of a similar age group as the La Trobe Melbourne students, and quite a few of them have studied abroad as exchange students. They are all very good at choosing and/or making resources to use in their interaction with LTM students, for example pictures, maps, graphs and photos. They were all given an hour's paid preparation/induction time before they started working on the programs.

All participating students from the University are paid at the hourly rate of casual general staff members of Navitas Bundoora Ltd.

Differences

The University students are studying in a mixture of post graduate and graduate courses. Some of them are tutors or laboratory demonstrators at the University. Some of the others work at call centres.

As stated above, the La Trobe Melbourne students choosing the buddy program have to pay an extra fee; however, the costs for the other two programs are covered by their tuition fees. The buddy program is conducted wholly external to La Trobe Melbourne. The orientation tour starts at La Trobe Melbourne Hall. The conversation groups are at La Trobe Melbourne the whole time.

The orientation tour is run for two hours; the buddy program is for 20 hours over 4 weeks. The conversation groups last for an hour each and there are five of them in a week. The latter is attended by ELICOS and FSDP students while the orientation tour is for new ELICOS students only. The buddy program is for short courses and exchange students. Only attendance at the orientation tour is compulsory; the other two are by LTM students' choice.

Student Feedback

In this section are recorded excerpts from stories given as feedback by La Trobe Melbourne and La Trobe University student participants.

1. Students from La Trobe Melbourne

My story 1: Conversation with Australian students from La Trobe University:

I found it quite difficult to contribute to the conversation at first because I was not used to speaking in English in a group with a large number of people. I have always preferred to speak one on one when I am practising English. However, after a few attempts, I felt that I was able to join in and voice what I was thinking. Most of all, I felt happy that my opinion was valued by the group. They picked up my idea and had a conversation about it. This was thrilling.

When I go back to class and the teacher says that I have to stand in front and present to the whole class, I think I will have more confidence now. I feel very nice now. My aim is to go and speak with my girl in English. I think she will enjoy. It is very useful as at home we speak in my own language. It will be fun now that I can speak without being scared that I will say something wrong.

The group has made me more confident to speak in public. It has improved my pronunciation. It is good for making more friends and to have fun. I think I will make friends with Australians.

My story 2: conversation with Australian students from La Trobe University

I was hesitant to join the conversation group because I am a shy person. However, I decided to accompany my friend to her first session. This is my story, a story of my experience with meeting Australian students and joining in a group conversation with them.

In class, the teacher decides the topic which we practise for speaking. This is not always interesting, whereas in my conversation with La Trobe University students we could talk about our interests. It was a more interactive and natural way to learn. It was more relaxed and comfortable. When I am relaxed, I have noticed that I can speak in English more fluently. It helped me develop my listening skills as well.

I met new people in the group and made more friends. The University student helped me know about Australian culture and resolve my doubts about Australian people and their ways. Also if I have any questions about real life in Uni I can ask the Aussie student.

I really love to take part in this conversation group as I can improve my speaking skills, find out some interesting information from native people and have fun. At first I was nervous but after a while I became relaxed because the LTU student was friendly. She really seemed to love to communicate with us and that made me feel relaxed and confident. Then I was very glad that I came to join. Her down to earth and friendly expression was great to relate to.

I really liked talking to her. I had a great time.

My story 3: conversation with Australian students from La Trobe University

The room in the Independent Learning Centre at La Trobe Melbourne was crowded and the noise level was high. There were two groups of students in deep conversation with Australian students from La Trobe University in the room, and another group at a table just outside the room. They were all speaking and laughing, looking at some laminated pictures which were coloured. I was drawn to the group by their sheer enjoyment of the moment. I felt I wanted to be one with them, a part of their group. The Australian student seemed to be of a similar age as the ELICOS students. She had a different look and movements from the others and an Australian accent, but they all seemed together as one force, a part of the same meaning which they were weaving together.

I could not pull myself away any longer. I joined in even though they had started. They had been meeting every Friday. I believe there were three sessions a week, and up to five students could converse with one Australian student from the University. It was advertised on noticeboards and on the large screens but I had not paid much attention before. Now, seeing them there, enjoying themselves, I wanted to be with them.

The group I joined went for an hour.

That was my first attempt. I was not confident at first because a native speaker speaks quite fast. Everyone in the group had different accents and they spoke in very different ways but I really benefitted from this and surprisingly, my listening skills have improved. Now, on the tram or the bus, sometimes, when I am not listening to my iPod, I can actually understand some of the things that schoolchildren or older Aussies say amongst themselves.

I noticed that sometimes they used pictures to motivate us in the conversation group. Speaking about the pictures I improved my vocabulary and speaking capability. I learned a lot of new words and some Aussie idioms which I still feel awkward to use. I got the chance to learn about Australia from an Australian of my own age. The group provided me with the perfect opportunity to listen to and practise English.

After a few attempts, I found myself talking about things I would not normally talk about, especially not in my language, with my classmates. I realised that the group was

very important; it was providing me with a kind of freedom to speak. It was something like learning to fly.

I also noticed that the Australian students gave us gentle hints about facial expressions, hand gestures, head movement and the way we hold our upper body when speaking. I had not thought about these things being different from one culture to another, and how these construct or obstruct meaning.

When we arrive in Australia, we do not know how things work here. We don't know what food to try or what places to go to. Through the conversation group I was able to learn new ideas, and about places. I gained confidence, and the language, with the correct expressions, to go out and try some new things. This was scary at first, but exciting.

I was really surprised by how friendly the Australian students are. They are just like us.

2. Students from La Trobe University

2.1 Orientation Tours

LTU Student 1: I have been a tour guide for new students from La Trobe Melbourne for a few years now, and it has been a great experience. I love showing the new students the beautiful University grounds. The students love seeing the gardens and the wildlife. We show them the places of necessity, and if asked, we show them areas of particular interest to them. The new students enjoy talking, and they ask me about my life as a student at La Trobe University. Outside of these tours, students have no issue coming to us with a question as we have become familiar and friendly faces for them.

LTU Student 2: I feel that many LTM students on these tours are quite tired, from an overload of information. Some leave the tour even before it is complete. I feel that some food, or just snacks, should be provided for the students, after the information session and before the tour. At this time it would be good for students to develop friendships. They could sit in smaller groups and talk about what they had learned or did not understand from the information session. Sometimes I felt that the information I provided was too detailed for some of the students. Some of them were already overwhelmed by other information from earlier in the day and the activities of the previous day.

2.2 Buddy Program

I really enjoyed leading the Buddy Program this year. The students were very much interested in having different experiences. They constantly had new ideas for things they wanted to try. They were not interested in the Trivia event or the Living in Melbourne seminar or the short films. So we changed the events to go to the beach, to an Aussie pub and to listen to a live band. We swam at St Kilda, had fish and chips and saw a movie. The most popular activity was shopping in Melbourne City. The allocated time and budget was fine although there were some schedule changes. A suggestion is that the students should join the program in pairs.

2.3 Conversation groups

LTU Student 1: I have been one of the La Trobe University students running the conversation groups at the College, and it has been a wonderful experience. We have a selected theme centred on Australian life for each week. With some groups, for example the Foundation Studies and Diploma students, we talk about the University.

LTU Student 2: The students enjoy making new friends through the groups. They have made friends with us as well. They express that they do not often meet Australians, and often I get asked how they can meet more Australians in other ways. I also get to learn about the students' cultures. We enjoy comparing our practices and ways of life. The

conversation groups almost act as a big cultural exchange amongst everyone from different backgrounds.

LTU Student 3: Being with other University students who participate in leading the conversation groups makes the experience fun and easy to manage. The feedback we have received from the La Trobe Melbourne students is very positive. The conversation groups should continue.

Conclusion

The feedback provided above is only a sample of those received; however, as per the whole feedback, the small group conversations are the most enjoyable of all the activities. As long as the La Trobe Melbourne budget allows it, the orientation tours and the conversation groups will continue. However, the proposed transition is to recruit and employ the domestic students already enrolled at La Trobe Melbourne.

Future Plans

A Student Activities Officer, a final year student of La Trobe University, has been appointed to liaise with the Student Representative Committee on organising activities.

La Trobe Melbourne is planning to put more emphasis next year on volunteer jobs and future careers of students. Mentoring of students is also being planned. Student engagement in these areas should bring LTM students closer to a wider network of Australians and people from other backgrounds than their own.