Intercultural sensitivity training toolkit: 
Augmenting academic engagement patterns

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This research paper presents conceptual strategies for developing a web-based toolkit utilising scenario-based learning to enhance students’ and academics’ intercultural sensitivity (IS) and further explores the feasibility of using IS training during orientation and induction into higher education to promote intercultural engagement. Pre-intervention data relating to participants’ study contexts, learning experiences, cultural perspectives, and perceived benefits and obstacles to intercultural engagement are gathered through reflective writing blogs and in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis is applied to identify and unpack culture-specific patterns of learning and intercultural engagement. The results inform the design of an IS toolkit; portraying experience-based and research-informed training scenarios depicting, initially, cultural stereotypes and authentic behaviours, before illustrating integrated and culturally responsive teaching strategies and learning styles. The exposure sequence progressively challenges users’ values, beliefs and attitudes about teaching and learning. Post-intervention, participants’ perceptions are re-examined through focus groups and in-depth interviews to evaluate the effectiveness of the toolkit. Social network analysis is applied to establish intercultural competence apparent in new patterns of academic engagement, whilst a phenomenographic analysis maps transformation in participants’ awareness and understanding of the concept of intercultural engagement.

Keywords: academic engagement; intercultural sensitivity; reflective blogging

Introduction

Globalisation, apart from being fluid and accessible, has been recognised as a synergistic and transformative force that influences the activities of all stakeholders (Barnett, 2011). Across the globe, universities are focused on attracting international students in order to increase enrolments and are continuously striving to prepare a receptive academic environment to maximise the student experience. The concept of internationalisation is much debated and diversely interpreted. The existing literature views internationalisation as the integration of students from diverse cultural backgrounds in a learning environment, resulting in the emergence of internationalised classrooms (Knight, 2003). Culturally diverse classrooms pose significant challenges in terms of interactive participation, building inquiry, fostering debate and developing engagement with learning activities (Arkoudis et al., 2010). The Australian education system has been identified as being exclusive to international students to the extent that the ‘edu-business’ nearly collapsed in recent years, spurring on a rapid review and correction in Australia’s systems and processes (Gunawardena & Wilson, 2012). In response, the University of New England’s (UNE) Strategic Plan ‘Learning Without Limits’ and vision statement aspire to achieve ‘greater international connectivity’ within its courses (UNE, 2013). The international dimension is highly relevant in all facets of university life influencing scholarship, teaching, learning, research and institutional management (Montgomery, 2010). Universities need to embrace a holistic approach to the internationalisation aspect in order to increase the international and domestic students’ experience (Kamara, 2012; Pyne, 2013).
International and domestic students are continuously exposed to new cultures and perspectives, playing a significant role in defining their academic experience. Existing literature highlights numerous studies that outline the academic challenges international students face including learning in a second language, cultural adjustments, education differences and language barriers (Osmond & Roed, 2010). Culture is dynamic, complex and intertwined with values, beliefs and norms. Culture also encompasses language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts (Zimmerman, 2012). In light of this discussion understanding one’s own cultural perspectives is instrumental in gaining a deeper understanding and appreciation of other cultures and accepting the differences (Brown & Jones, 2011). Although the literature acknowledges that domestic students have misconceptions and misunderstandings about other cultures, this target group is the one that is much neglected within the higher education research (Brown & Richards, 2011). Similarly the literature available on the academic experiences and challenges faced by postgraduate students is sparse. As such, this research project will address this identified gap by including postgraduate students as one of the target groups.

A gap exists in the literature in terms of building effective interactions between domestic and international students in an internationalised classroom. These interactions are integral to building the intercultural experience, fostering networking capabilities and leading to career opportunities (Osmond & Roed, 2010). Culturally diverse classrooms need to embrace inclusive learning and teaching practices to reduce the variability in accessing resources (Eisenchlas & Trevaskes, 2007). By applying Biggs’s (2003) 3P learning model cross-culturally student content can be identified by way of assessing their preferred learning styles and underlying cognitive processes, followed by identifying the teaching shortfalls in terms of the curriculum and teachers. The research project extends the cognitive processes of learning and includes the affective, by fostering interaction through higher levels of engagement and was aligned with UNE’s Strategic Plan that aims to create an inclusive academic environment (Pyne, 2013) inspiring ‘Learning Without Limits’ (UNE, 2013). Successful peer interactions cannot be assumed to just happen amongst international and domestic students, merely because they share a campus or a course (Anderson, 2008).

The multicultural construction of the classroom presents several problems associated with intercultural difference including academic and social isolation, racial profiling of students, language versus communication barriers and cultural dissonance (Osmond & Roed, 2010). The overarching aim of this research project was to better prepare students for multicultural workplaces by increasing participants’ intercultural sensitivity through enhancing their intercultural awareness and intercultural competence. This can be achieved through advancing the signature pedagogy for higher education, one that promotes best practice in culturally responsive teaching. The mechanism for change was exposure of students and academics to a set of training scenarios based on the elicited intercultural experiences of the participants and key stakeholders (undergraduate and postgraduate students, and academic staff within the UNE community). Comparing students’ and academics’ intercultural sensitivity pre- and post-training determined the effectiveness of the training to augmenting intercultural competence.

UNE and its Business School form the main context for the research, the study population and piloting of the web-based IS training toolkit. Currently, 457 out of 2632 (17%) undergraduates and 62 out of 73 (45.2%) postgraduate students in the UNE Business School are classified as international students and 20 out of 47 (42%) academic staff represents different nationalities (UNE, 2013). In 2011, approximately 22% of the staff across the university identified as having English as a second language.

In light of this discussion including student and academic demographics, this research project explored the effectiveness of developing a web-based IS training toolkit and further academic
engagement patterns to foster best practice in a higher education context by advancing a signature pedagogy. The paper presents the intial findings from the first stages of this study, focussing on culture-specific patterns of learning and teaching encountered in higher education.

**Literature Syntheses and Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts a socio-cultural approach (Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978) to framing the different facets of *intercultural competence*, conceptualised as an outcome of internationalisation and the increasing ability to effectively interrelate and appropriately interact with individuals from other cultures (Deardoff, 2006; Perry & Southwell, 2011). We assume participants’ attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours form within the context of the social practices experienced in their formative years. The cultural practices of the academic environment range from the familiar and similar, to those starkly different from one’s own. Yet, perceiving cultural difference requires *intercultural awareness* and its affective response to difference and cultural variation, *intercultural sensitivity* (Brown & Jones, 2011). Our research methodology aims to foster participants’ cultural self-awareness and to promote intercultural awareness, emulating Bennett’s (1993) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. The research process and intervention progress participants’ appreciation of difference through initiating a shift from *ethnocentrism* and judging culture by own values and standards, towards *ethnorelativism* and experiencing one’s own culture in the context of others. The individual’s realignment with the world is demonstrated as an enhanced performance capability illustrated in more effective intercultural learning interactions.

In a globalised world, existing trends indicate that attempts for students to acquire higher education in an international context and in a culture that is totally unfamiliar to them, are increasing on a continued basis. Studying abroad is considered a valuable form of experiential learning by many researchers (Kolb, 1984). Many students are merely exposed to their target international country and host culture without much preparation or without even having an adequate knowledge of the appropriate pedagogical measures. Notwithstanding the fact that domestic students are continuously exposed to culturally distinct counterparts (Williams, 2005). Therefore, the university’s obligation is to prepare students as citizens for working life in the globalized system. This can be achieved by way of enhancing students’ international awareness, increasing their own self-awareness and working to increasing their level of sensibility to other cultures (Wiesman & Koester, 1993). However, universities fail to offer comprehensive measures for students that actually foster intercultural competence, engagement processes and learning outcomes.

The experiences that students gain through the higher education process need to systematically transform and develop into distinct competencies and performance. Transformation is inhibited where infrequent peer interaction exists or between students and academics. Universities need to take responsibility for making the adjustment process easier for students by way of providing appropriate support systems. In order to foster effective dialogue and interaction it is important to understand the concept of culture. Culture is dynamic and the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another”(Hofstede, 1980). A comprehensive understanding of one’s own culture juxtaposed with awareness of the host culture, enables comparison and identification of the similarities and differences that foster interaction by way of understanding cultural conventions. The concept of intercultural sensitivity has attracted continuous debate and is often identified as a mix of understanding the cultural behaviour, demonstrated openness towards cultural differences and exhibition of behavioural adjustments and/or flexibilities in the host culture (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992).

Intercultural sensitivity is conceptualised as an individual’s ability to develop positive emotions
towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes effective behaviour in intercultural communication (Chen, 2006). The integrated research and IS training toolkit development framework, (Figure 1), aims to capture respondents’ awareness of their own culture, the host culture, cultural differences/similarities and cultural familiarity through reflective blogging. Using in-depth interviews, participants’ belief systems are explored elucidating their perceptions about the teaching, research and learning practices of their home culture, before identifying the similarities or differences to the host country and offering ways to complement these various styles in augmenting academic engagement patterns. Based on the responses obtained through reflective blogging exercises and in-depth interviews, analysis of the data will feed forward to the development of intercultural sensitivity case scenarios (IS training toolkit) as part of an online training intervention. Following exposure to the scenarios, participants’ perceptions will again be gathered through focus group discussions and closing in-depth interviews. The change in the participants’ understanding of the concept of intercultural sensitivity will be measured quantitatively using social network analysis and qualitatively by way of employing phenomenography (Åkerlind, 2002, 2004; Trigwell et al. 2005).

The participants’ acceptance of intercultural sensitivity evidenced by their cognitive behavioural changes and adoption through effective integration (Pennington & Wildermuth, 2005) will measure their orientation towards ethnorelativism in the context of other cultures. Similarly through the suggested framework, participants’ orientation towards ethnocentrism and their efforts to minimize cultural differences will be gathered qualitatively through in-depth interviews. Participants’ affective behaviour will be analysed on the basis of the responses obtained through their cross-cultural attitude, skills and competencies developed through engagement with culture specific and culture generic scenarios, and intercultural encounters.

In a highly globalised world, and an increasingly internationalised higher education sector the need to enhance students’ awareness of cultural similarities and differences is a constant (Peng, Rangsipah & Thaipakee, 2005). The purpose of this research study is to examine the potential disparities of three target groups (such as undergraduates, postgraduates and academics at UNE) in regard to the concept of intercultural sensitivity and analyse their subsequent engagement in various academic (teaching, research and learning) patterns. In light of this discussion, researchers involved in the current research project propose an integrated research and development framework for the IS training toolkit, presented in Figure 1.
Research Methodology

Sampling
A sample of 15 undergraduate students, 15 postgraduate students and 15 academic staff will be recruited via email invitation. A convenience sample will be gathered from undergraduate students across UNE’s Business School. The sampling of postgraduate students and staff will widen to include individuals from across all disciplines at the university. A stratified approach to sampling will be adopted with the sample divided in two groups: (A) participants from the Business school comprising at least 50% of the population and (B) participants from other disciplines (50%). Undergraduate students, postgraduate students and academic staff are likely to be a mixture of domestic and international students, alongside national and international staff. The study will adopt a multilevel mixed methods approach applied over five stages.

Stage 1 Reflective Blogging
All three participant groups (undergraduates, postgraduates, and academics) are invited via email to partake in a set of reflective writing exercises documented using the narrative medium of blogging. A reflective writing training session is provided prior to blogging. To encourage the reflective process, daily question prompts are posted delving into international and home participants’ experiences of learning in Australian Higher Education. The experiences of learning in higher education gained are analysed to define culturally predisposed, stereotypic and desired ways of learning and teaching.

Stage 2 In-depth Interviews
Interviews are conducted with all three participant groups examining, in detail, their incidents of intercultural engagement during learning and teaching. The question protocol aims to identify benefits of and obstacles to constructive intercultural learning events i.e. challenges such as learning in a second language, similarities and differences in study contexts and lack of dialogue between international and domestic students. By unpacking authentic, stereotypical and culturally responsive ways of learning and teaching styles effective intercultural engagement strategies will be elicited as micro and macro thematic categories identifying common success factors to intercultural-learning during peer-peer and peer-teacher interactions.

Stage 3 Development of the IS training toolkit
The results from the data analysis at stage 1 and stage 2 are combined with the theoretical framework to inform the learning design and subject content of the toolkit’s scenarios. The exposure sequence (cultural stereotypes, authentic behaviors, cultural responsiveness) is designed to progressively enhance participants’ intercultural awareness and understanding of positive intercultural learning interactions.

Stage 4 Evaluation of the project
Evaluation will involve focus group discussions conducted with a sample of the participants to measure the effectiveness of the toolkit to affecting change in intercultural awareness. Thematic analysis will identify success criteria in the form of (1) increased intercultural sensitivity as a factor of participants’ orientation towards ethnorelativism or ethnocentricism, and (2) enhanced intercultural competence. A final phase of data collection will use a purposive sampling approach to conducting semi-structured interviews across the three participant groups involved. Social network analysis will discern intercultural competence through the nodes and ties of social relationships evident in new patterns of learner engagement, and displayed as a social network diagram. A phenomenographic analysis will assess change and variation in participants’ awareness and understanding of the concept of intercultural engagement.
Stage 5 In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews will be conducted with the three identified target groups. The question protocol developed for this stage will aim to secure potential respondents’ intercultural awareness, change in their academic engagement patterns and their readiness to accept various teaching and learning styles. These interviews will be transcribed and various macro and micro thematic categories will be elicited. The interviews will serve to uncover the different ways each of the three target groups experience, conceptualise, recognise and understand the various components of the concept of intercultural sensitivity.

Intercultural Sensitivity Training Toolkit

The toolkit will be a multi-user and multi-contributory repository that can be accessed globally, documenting effective teaching behaviours and disseminating best practice for intercultural classrooms in higher education.

Functionality

The IS Training Toolkit will be developed as an open source web-based resource. The user interface will consist of a website homepage providing access to the multimedia and database functions of the site. Three training components will be accessible from the homepage:

1. Video-based training scenarios – a set of embedded video clips featuring actors portraying cultural stereotypes and authentic behaviours. Clips will have the usual forward, pause, rewind functions etc.
2. Animation explainer videos and training scenarios using open source software (www.powtoon.com). PowToon has the ability to import soundtracks, enabling authentic accents to be added to the scenarios depicting culturally responsive teaching and learning styles.
3. Intercultural communication database with linked Geographic Information System (ArcGIS) capability enabling manipulation of special areas using StatPlanet Plus software e.g. selecting regions and countries of the world (Asia, Africa, Europe, Americas, Australasia) allowing users to query specific student ethnicities representative of their lecture/seminar/tutorial population.

Scalability

The web-site will be designed as a fully scalable resource accessible through web browser software on either desktops or laptops, with Mac and PC compatibility and the ability to run in standard browsers (Internet Explorer, Safari, Google Chrome etc.).

Transferability

The toolkit affords a multi-contextual training resource that can be applied to particular areas within institutions and specific organisations in the higher education sector, as follows:

1. Orientation and induction packages for undergraduate and postgraduate students.
2. Postgraduate and undergraduate courses that have high proportions of international students and staff.
3. Human resources and staff training.
4. English language training centres.
5. Disciplines with substantial practice-based components or employment requirements e.g. teacher education, nursing, medicine, psychology.
6. Cross-disciplinary courses and units that experience culturally diverse student cohorts and staff.
Dual sector institutions – i.e. collaborative projects between the vocational education training sector and university sector.

**Sustainability**
The web-site design takes into account maximising economic viability and environmental sustainability, as follows:

1. Anticipated developing and piloting life cycle of the product is 12 months followed by an external launch to partner institutions and others extending at least 5 years. At this stage, the resource is a low cost multi-contributory repository where future partners can submit additions such as scripted and unscripted scenario designs, related research outputs and database population.

2. Upgrading of the website scheduled at three times per year using existing software solutions. Should updated versions be released these will be evaluated for value-added features before migrating content. A user group will be established with future partner institutions to identify areas of the website for modification and upgrading.

3. The website is designed to eliminate negative environmental impact by removing the need to hold face-to-face training that requires learners and trainers to commute to the training site.

**Conclusion**

At the time of submission, we have received institutional ethics approval to proceed with the early implementation of, what is effectively, a design experiment combining an emic approach delivering authenticity to the scenario modelling with an etic approach outlined in the conceptual strategies for development. The project has yet to be fully articulated: collective evidence needs to be gathered, interpreted and fed back into an iterative process of scenario development. Subsequently it will be evaluated by the participants in terms of fitness for purpose(s) and expected trajectory of learning and by the research community in terms of capability and impact. The intervention has the potential to add value to the higher education sector as a whole, addressing the globalisation and internationalisation agendas by envisaging an authentic signature pedagogy for higher education teachers drawing on contextualised evidence of learning and teaching. As an open access training resource, this has the potential to attract the attention of universities at home and abroad, and regenerate the university experience for students and academics (home and international) alike who are increasingly exposed to different cultures and need the requisite intercultural competence to be able to work together effectively.

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**References**


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