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The Multicultural Classroom - A Guaranteed Intercultural Learning Space?

115 - Successful Internationalization of Higher Education

Abstract

Alongside student mobility, 'Internationalization at Home' has become an important strategy to achieve internationalization. Classrooms reflect this trend in their increasingly international and diverse student set-up. Leveraging the benefits of the multicultural classroom, however, requires qualified teachers that can accommodate different learning, communication and conflict styles. This paper relates this issue to research on the impact of studying abroad on intercultural learning. It discusses relevant success factors and outlines areas for further research.

Keywords:

Multicultural classroom, intercultural learning, intercultural competence, communication styles, learning styles, diversity, professional development

1. Introduction

Among the various measures taken to achieve internationalization, student mobility still seems to be the prime instrument. An increase in the quantity is often equated with growth in quality. Apart from few programmes where a study or work placement abroad is an integral obligatory curriculum component, many students cannot participate in mobility schemes, not least those who study part-time or have family obligations. Institutions and programmes have therefore regarded 'Internationalization at Home' as an alternative strategic concept (Beelen 2007, Beelen / Jones 2015). The most recent Bologna Monitoring Report (BMFWF 2015a) as well as the *Fachhochschulentwicklungs- und Finanzierungsplan für 2017/18* (BMWF 2015b) explicitly mention courses in English as a strategic internationalization measure: "ausländische Studierende [können ...] als Vermittlerinnen und Vermittler von Kultur, Sprache und akademischen Gepflogenheiten ihrer Herkunftsländer für die nicht mobilen inländischen Studierenden und Lehrenden fungieren" (BMFWF 2015a: 42). The question, however, needs to be raised whether courses taught in English with some international students attending will automatically create intercultural learning space and result in a higher intercultural competence level. This paper relates this issue to research on the impact of studying abroad on intercultural learning. It discusses relevant success factors and outlines areas for further research.

2. The Myth of Exposure and the Pivotal Role of the Teacher

Evidence seems to dismantle the myth of the automatic acquisition of intercultural competence through exposure to and immersion into a new cultural environment (Bennett 2009; Bridges 2011; Vande Berg et al. 2012; Weber Bosley / Lou 2011). In the most comprehensive of these studies, the Georgetown Project, only one US study-abroad programme out of 61 could boast a significant intercultural competence gain in its participating students. Reflection and cultural mentoring were the cornerstones of success in this particular programme, which makes intentional accompanying facilitation activities the key success factors for the cultural learning process (Vande Berg et al. 2009).

Can these findings in the context of study-abroad programmes about facilitation and cultural learning also be applied to the learning taking place in a multicultural classroom setting at home? A number of studies carried out in the US, UK and Australia seem to confirm that the mere exposure to an international student body in a classroom will not automatically translate into intercultural learning. Furthermore, these studies showed the rather discouraging results that negative attitudes towards students from other backgrounds have not changed much for the better over the last two decades. Only where deliberate intervention measures inside and outside the formal curriculum were taken, such as peer mentoring, was a change in attitude discernible (Leask / Carroll 2011). In this context it is also interesting to note that both teachers as well as students tend to overestimate their own progress and achieved levels of learning, as "gains in levels of intercultural competence development mostly are self-reported and the perceived levels of intercultural competence often are higher than the actual levels" (Gregersen-Hermans 2014:9). So what are the factors that lead to a conducive learning environment in the multicultural classroom? Are they comparable to those mentioned for the cultural learning abroad experience?

As early as 2000 Teekens pointed to the teacher as the pivotal figure for a successful multicultural classroom (Teekens 2000, see also Berardo / Deardorff 2012; Lauridsen / Cozart 2015; Leask 2015; Van Gaalen / Gielsen 2014). Apart from linguistic proficiency – in most cases English – teachers must have a defined level of intercultural competence to integrate a variety of learning, communication and conflict styles. Groups with diverse members can either be more productive when their diversity is leveraged or utterly fail when this aspect is ignored or even suppressed (Barta 2011; Distefano / Maznevski 2000; Halverson / Tirmizi 2008; Hunt et al. 2014; Schmid 2010, 2014). In the multicultural classroom, the teacher needs to be able to identify cultural differences, address incidents in a culturally appropriate and sensitive manner, separate personality and cultural issues from each other, and facilitate the achievement of the defined learning outcome for all students in the class through appropriate task and assessment design. This set of competences is of course called for in addition to the teachers' academic qualifications and has usually not been taught during their own academic training. In accordance with Deardorff's process model of intercultural competence (2006, 2009), this requires the teacher to have the appropriate attitudinal, cognitive and behavioural skills and competences for providing a learning space that accommodates such a diverse student set-up. Figure 1 shows in more detail what this implies. Intercultural learning is an ongoing process and competence

is manifested in a specific intercultural encounter and therefore relative to the parameters that define this situation. For the multicultural classroom this entails awareness on the part of the teachers about their own orientation towards cultural difference in relation to the concrete student set-up.

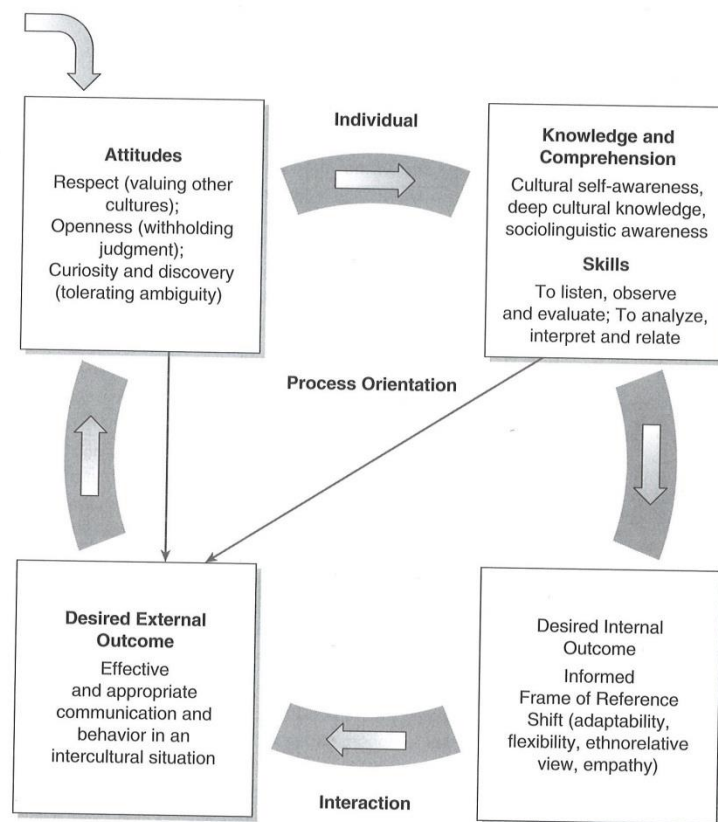


Figure 1: The Deardorff model of intercultural competence (Deardorff 2009:33)

It is obvious that teacher training and an institutional mechanism are necessary to ensure that only qualified and well prepared teachers are in charge of multicultural classrooms. It is highly recommended that these teachers have gone through an intercultural learning process – for example, as part of a study abroad experience – themselves. Institutional practices, however, do not traditionally reflect this necessity in their recruitment or staff development policies as the academic profile is still often only characterized by a teacher's research and publication record or potential. It is also a common delusion that language proficiency in English qualifies a teacher for the multicultural classroom. Even a teacher with a sound pedagogic background and ample classroom experience may struggle with this task, as proven strategies for homogeneous groups will not be easily transferable or may even fail when indiscriminately implemented with diverse groups. Left alone, teachers may become frustrated and attribute stereotypical characteristics to certain groups of students. The multicultural classroom should therefore not be an isolated silo, but reflect a shared attitude among faculty members towards the learning potential of diverse groups in any discipline. Beelen and Jones

put this succinctly when calling for comprehensive staff development at departmental levels with the aim to internationalize "existing, discipline specific learning outcomes within the home curriculum for all students, [and a focus] on appropriate pedagogy and associated assessment" (2015: 70).

This also leads to another relevant factor, i.e. the integration of intercultural learning not only at the individual course level, but in the curriculum and in the overall institutional policy. A coherent approach hinges on the alignment of content with learning strategies and assessment methods and their proper implementation in the classroom. As the implementers at the operative level, teachers need to be involved in all phases of this process. Dealing with diversity is a key competence for a graduate in any discipline and a reality of the workplace environment. Taking employability, but also personal and professional development seriously, it is the responsibility of teachers, curriculum designers and the university at large to provide a learning space and define learning outcomes that enable the achievement of this competence.

3. Classroom Management and the Intercultural Learning Space

The Bologna focus on student-centred learning has become an important didactic orientation in the universities of applied sciences' sector in Austria, where active student involvement in group projects, presentations, discussions and peer reviews are encouraged. Students coming from a background with high power distance, strong institutional collectivism, but low assertiveness (House et al. 2004) and having a high context communication style (Hall 1981) may not easily cope with this approach and will require guidance and sufficient time for adaptation. Anecdotal evidence is mirrored in the narratives of the notorious 'Spanish' student not showing up for group project meetings or the 'Japanese' student who never speaks up in these meetings and is 'obviously' not interested or cannot contribute anything. The question is not who needs to adapt to whom, but how can diversity be utilized to increase intercultural learning for all students in a classroom.

It is the teacher's obligation to provide space for negotiating common ground and planning activities that will integrate different learning and communication styles. Learning activities, assessment methods as well as the role the teacher adopts in the classroom setting will therefore need to be carefully chosen and their impact has to be taken into consideration (Bennett 2012; Carroll 2015; Deardorff et al. 2012; IEAA 2013; Gibbs 2006; Paige / Goode 2009). Pasarelli / Kolb (2012) have identified four main roles a teacher can take on and have characterized associated teaching and learning strategies. These roles comprise the coach, facilitator, subject expert, and standard setter/evaluator as exemplified in Figure 2. In correlation with these roles, teachers can put their focus on the learner, the knowledge, the subject, or on activities. The beliefs underlying each role affect the goals, teaching styles and classroom practices a teacher favours. Teachers unaware of their own preferences may assume that they treat everyone equally and thus fairly, whereas actually they discriminate unintentionally against certain groups of students.

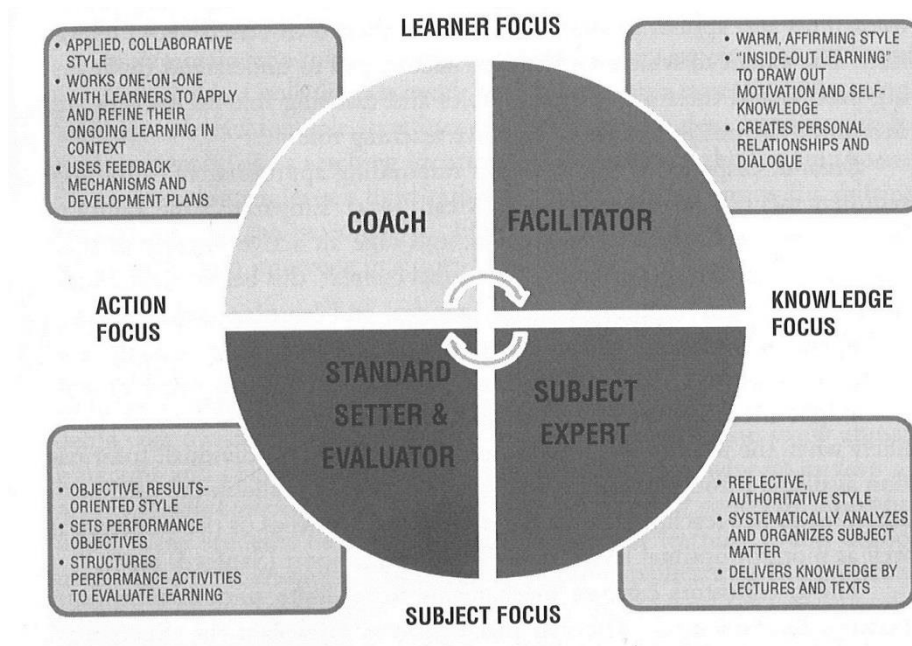


Figure 2: Teaching roles (Pasarelli / Kolb 2012: 153)

Depending on their background, students may have been familiarized in the educational system with only one particular role. Being confronted without preparation with different or even diametrically opposite roles, their practised and proven learning strategies will suddenly be seen as deficient, often aggravated by a lack of fluency in English. The teacher in the multicultural classroom has to find out what perception of a 'good' teacher and related expectations about efficient learning students bring along. It is not sufficient to know students' nationalities as "student groups will differ, one from another and individuals will differ within those groups" (IEAA 2013:8). Carroll (2015) provides a range of questions and culturally appropriate methods to elicit this information. Accordingly, the teacher will have to flexibly switch roles and adapt the classroom design to foster the learning process for all. As a precondition the teacher him/herself has to become aware of the culturally preferred role s/he takes on within a familiar and mono-cultural setting. Self-awareness of role expectations and applications seem to be a learning process the teacher has to undergo him/herself at first.

Additionally, it is necessary to make local students see the benefit of cultural learning for their own professional and personal development (Edmead 2013). Otherwise, local students will often see attempts at integrating foreign students as a waste of time or even a "threat to achieving learning goals, especially if those goals are not clearly linked to the interactions [with foreign students] required to achieve them" (Leask / Carroll 2011: 650). As a consequence, only if intercultural competence is an integral component across the curriculum and a defined learning outcome, for which students are also assessed, will local students be more likely to engage with non-local students.

Creating a supportive intercultural learning space includes careful task design and varied assessment methods that will not unfairly cater for one group of learners only. While the priority given to active engagement is an important facet of student-centred learning, it has to be planned and implemented carefully in the multi-cultural classroom. Figure 3 shows a variety of learning activities along the continuum from passive to active learning. These activities correlate with specific assessment methods.

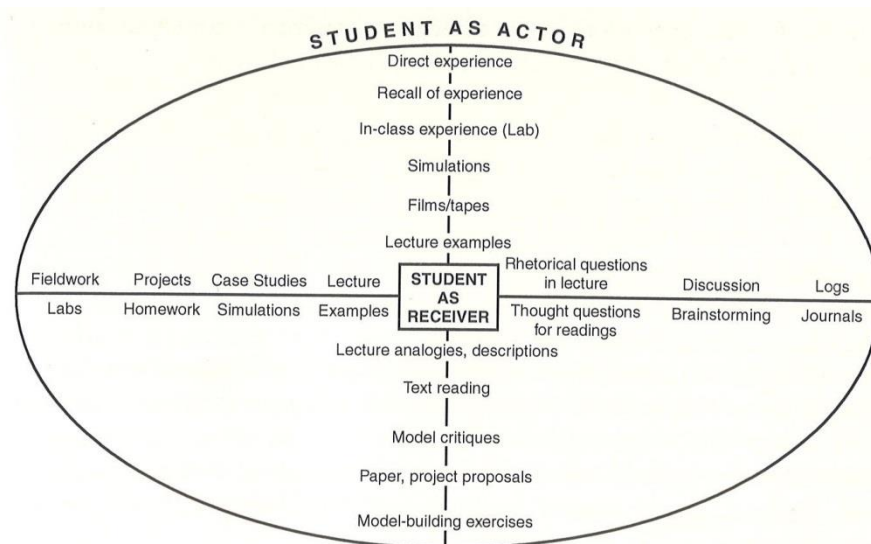


Figure 3: Learning activities around Kolb's learning cycle and their degree of active student engagement (Pasarelli / Kolb 2012: 154)

Students socialized in the context of passive learning will need empathic support and acknowledgement of their background so as not to withdraw for fear of failure or loss of face. More time needs to be set aside for facilitating group work. Especially the phases of forming, storming and norming in teambuilding need structured guidance. Groups need to identify their expectations and individual strengths, find ways to agree on inclusive work procedures and conflict protocols, determine group-appropriate meeting and decision-making styles and above all, use respectful and appreciative communication (Halverson / Tirmizi 2008). Methods like brainstorming, for example, could be replaced or complemented by brainwriting. Silence could be strategically used to encourage participation. Repetition and recapping could become a routine to confirm understanding. Agreements would not only be made orally, but also in writing, to point out just a few possibilities. Planning and facilitating group work needs to be spread across the curriculum with increasing complexity so that experiences of intercultural learning build on each other and skills are consolidated. In the end, all can profit. Teachers will broaden their pedagogic repertoires and increase their didactic competence with diverse groups. Students will learn how to communicate across cultural boundaries, which prepares them for their future workplace environments. Institutions will better fulfil their promise of graduate employability and fostering mature citizenship. However, all this does not happen automatically. It comes at a cost - if taken into account and invested in, it will pay off; if ignored, it will produce frustration and anger.

4. Conclusions

Research shows that the benefits of the multicultural classroom can be leveraged, if at least the following three aspects are guaranteed:

- Defined international and intercultural learning outcomes throughout the curriculum
- Flexible teacher roles and a well-designed learning space
- Interculturally competent and pedagogically qualified staff

Making resources available and strategically developing teachers' qualifications, for example through special trainings or teacher mobility schemes, need to be part of the overall institutional internationalization strategy and embedded at all levels (Gregersen-Hermans 2014, Walenkamp et al. 2015). Developing the intercultural skills in teachers so that they can create appropriate multicultural learning spaces needs to be one of the key objectives of an institutional staff development programme. Furthermore, the "purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments" (Beelen / Jones 2015: 69) needs to be reflected on in appropriate learning outcomes (Aerden 2015). Little evidence on the impact of such a strategy is yet available. Further research is therefore called for, especially on factors that facilitate the achievement of intercultural and international learning outcomes (Matej 2014). Assessment instruments like the Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer 2009) or the memo©factors adopted in the recent Erasmus Impact Study (Brandenburg 2014) could be used for determining the current orientation towards cultural differences of teachers and students in the multicultural classroom as well as their progress of learning. Anecdotal evidence, questionnaires or other such formats need to be complemented by research methods grounded in sound and proven theoretical models such as the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensibility (Bennett 1993) or Deardorff's Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff 2014, Gregersen-Hermans 2014, Paige / Goode 2009).

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