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Contemporary Approaches in Training & Education for Cross-Cultural Competence – potentials, challenges and its limits

International Classroom Development: Implementation of an Integral Programme in Maastricht's School of Business and Economics

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Abstract

This case study analyzes the development of the international classroom within Maastricht University School of Business and Economics (SBE). Following earlier initiatives, in 2011 an integral programme was started, aiming simultaneously at skills development of staff and students. The case study provides a discussion of the implementation of the programme, including surprises, disappointments and successes. Discussion is centered around three themes: 1) The response by students 2) The pivotal role of teaching staff 3) The challenge of integrating behavioural skills into an academic curriculum.

This case study covers the situation until Mid-2013. Presentation at the conference will take into account developments until the Summer of 2015.

1. Introduction: the context of education

This case study analyzes the development of the international classroom within Maastricht University School of Business and Economics (SBE). Specifically, it focuses on the functioning of the classroom and the process of competence development by staff and students. Developments are covered until 2013.

Maastricht University School of Business and Economics (SBE) was founded in 1984 as part of the new Maastricht University (then known as State University of Limburg), a research based university in the south of The Netherlands, close to the Belgian and German border. From the 1990s programmes in English were introduced. Similar to the practice of other leading international business schools, the content of the curriculum was internationalized. Since the start of the Bachelor-Master structure in 2003 all major programmes have been exclusively taught in English.

SBE is accredited by AACSB, AMBA, EQUIS and NVAO (with the distinctive quality feature internationalisation). In 2012-2013, 4227 students were enrolled. Every semester, 200-300 exchange students study at the school, while all 3rd year Bachelor students go on exchange for one semester. Table 1 provides

date on the international composition of staff and students, showing a majority of students and staff from outside The Netherlands.

Table 1 Composition of SBE students and staff (excl. exchange students)

Country	Students		Academic Staff
	2008/2009	2012/2013	2012/2013
The Netherlands	40,2%	34,1%	36,9%
Germany	50,5%	47,1%	20,8%
Belgium	2,2%	4,4%	11,3%
Europe – other	4,4%	9,4%	20,5%
Outside Europe	2,0%	5,0%	10,5%

Source: SBE database

The pedagogy used at SBE follows the principles of Problem Based Learning. This has been a defining characteristic of Maastricht University from its foundation. Education takes place in small groups of 14 students and is directed at collaborative learning among students. Classroom discussion is led by students, based on tasks prepared by senior staff. Academic Staff has a role as tutor: they give feedback, facilitate meetings and guide students by asking critical questions.

This system of education requires adequate process skills from staff in managing tutorial groups. The importance of process skills in tutoring only increases with the internationalization of the classroom. The tutor should be able to respond to an increased diversity of communication styles, prior educational background of students, and expectations regarding the educational process, such as active student participation in class.

2. Earlier activities aimed at developing the international classroom

With the growth of the number of international students in English language programmes, a small number of dedicated staff started making proposals to give more explicit attention to the functioning of the international classroom. Implementation of the programme emerged in a step-by-step fashion:

- In 2005 a special Faculty Development Workshop was initiated on managing diversity in the classroom. This workshop was especially developed for the context of Problem Based Learning (see Talkin' Business 2006). Since 2010 this training has been part of the University Teaching Qualification in SBE (in Dutch "Basis Kwalificatie Onderwijs" or BKO), implying that all new tenured or tenure-track staff is required to follow the training in the first years of their appointment.
- In 2007 an elective skills training started "Dealing with diversity in an international context". This is an intensive 2 weeks training in intercultural communication, consisting of 20 contact hours. It is offered twice a year for 2nd and 3rd year's students in the Bachelors. Currently, about 5-10 % of the relevant student population choose this skills training. The training is based on an advanced textbook by Ting-Toomey (1999). This stands out for its approach to intercultural communication by combining values,

communication styles and identity negotiation (many textbooks combine at most two of these) and by spending equal attention to issues of domestic diversity and international cooperation (which are sometimes treated in isolation).

In 2011-2012 the Programme International Classroom Development started, aiming at all students and staff. This will be discussed in the remainder of this case study.

3. Experiences with the Programme International Classroom Development

The programme started in year 1 of the Bachelor programme in 2011-2012. It serves more than 1000 students a year, with a total of ca. 60-70 staff and teaching assistants involved. In each course period, two contact hours are spent on tasks related to basic intercultural competencies. From the start, these tasks were fully integrated in the material of the courses. In setting up the Programme International Classroom Development we especially looked at the issues playing a role in the specific context of SBE. This led to two main themes in year 1:

- Maintaining English as the *lingua franca* in and around the classroom. This proved to be challenging for 1st year students, especially for those from the majority groups (German and Dutch), leading to unintended exclusion mechanisms (see Swaan 2012 and Transfer 2013);
- First principles of teamwork.

The programme is coordinated by two staff members with longstanding experience in the School: one is specialized in intercultural communication (the author of this paper), the other in faculty development and communication skills (Jeannette Hommes). We coordinate implementation with the board, programme directors, teaching staff, and supporting staff (for instance regarding scheduling). The fact that we have developed the programme from within the School in cooperation with key stakeholders has definitely contributed to the acceptance of the programme.

Implementation of the Programme International Classroom Development rendered a number of important insights. We group them into three categories: alignment with students' interests, the pivotal role of teaching staff and integration into the curriculum.

Alignment with the mindset and interests of students

Regarding the two major goals of the programme, maintaining English as a *lingua franca*, and effective team cooperation, tutors have been observing gradual improvements as compared to earlier cohorts. At the same time, the initial response of the students to the programme was full of paradoxes and surprises. In the preparation stages, student representatives in the School Council and the Programme Committee were very strongly in favour of an active policy towards the international classroom. However, despite this and despite the fact that the tasks had been extensively prepared with a team consisting of staff and students, the implementation of the programme initially met with much less enthusiasm of participating students. The second year the programme was run, we made a number of changes in the content of the tasks and the

positioning of the tasks in the curriculum, which worked out well:

- We gave up the original setup where international classroom skills could be recognized as separate tasks within courses: they now are fully integrated in courses, better aligned with other course material, and part of graded exams. For example, when in the first year of the programme some literature related to international classroom activities was not part of the exam material, not more than an estimated 20% of the students would read it. The following year we made it part of the exam requirements.
- The number of activities relying on self-reflection related to the process of the international classroom is reduced (roughly by half), as this proved to be strange for many students. This response might be a matter of habituation or age; it could also be that students in economics and business are more externally focussed, task oriented and/or more apt at cognitive activities, as compared to students from other disciplines. The dilemma is that reflection skills are a crucial part of intercultural skills. Therefore it would be undesirable to eliminate these tasks entirely. On the other hand, the response of students should be taken into account, for which reason some reduction was unavoidable.
- More advanced development of intercultural skills is postponed to year 2 and 3 of the Bachelors, when students have more experience in international teamwork. In the first year, most students have not yet experienced many intercultural tensions; neither did they experience this before coming to SBE; in a way the programme is designed to reduce tensions in later years, but 1st year students are not yet fully aware of the potential challenges of working international teams.

The foregoing changes worked out very well. At the same time, the positive impact regarding teamwork and maintaining English as a *lingua franca* were maintained. The new components are now a standard element of the curriculum of the 1st year of the Bachelors. Based on the foregoing experiences, development in year 2 and 3 of the curriculum will be implemented in stepwise fashion, starting with small scale pilots.

Pivotal role of teaching staff

As international classroom development aims at the development of behavioural skills that fall outside the traditional, more cognitive orientation of research-based universities, the attitudes and skills of teaching staff play a crucial role when the development of intercultural skills is integrated into the curriculum. Due to the nature of a university work environment, the majority of the teaching staff has little experience in guiding learning processes specific to behavioural skills, such as intercultural skills. This means they are less well equipped to deal with students' responses to tasks and activities in these areas, such as critical questions, resistance and doubts about relevance. It also happens that some teachers see intercultural and behavioural skills as less important.

At the same time, teaching staff plays a pivotal role in the development of intercultural competencies students by providing feedback to students, by explaining the importance of activities and in general by setting an example in attitude and behaviour. Therefore, special attention was devoted to guiding the tutors who were involved in activities of the programme. In practice, this appeared to be more complex than foreseen. Because of the small-scale organization of education in SBE (500-1000 students in groups of 14-15 students,

with 10-20 tutors per course, who are simultaneously teaching multiple courses), it was impossible to schedule training sessions for staff. The maximum that could be attained were 2-3 sessions of half an hour, as part of regular tutor meetings. This was adequate to explain tasks, but insufficient for real training in intercultural teaching skills, as originally intended.

In addition, the commitment and interest of tutors varied a lot. Some participated with enormous enthusiasm, providing valuable feedback and suggestions. Others did not make it a secret that they did not see the use of devoting time to these activities. Apart from general attitudes towards working with behavioural skills, feeling the need to divert attention to other priority tasks also played a role in the response of teaching staff. Just as in other research based universities, SBE staff is faced with pressure to include an increasing variety of tasks and priorities in their daily jobs: publishing in top journals, developing new education programmes, especially in Master's programmes and MBA, fulfilling management tasks in the school, maintaining and increasing corporate connections, developing the international classroom etcetera.

As the programme offered fewer opportunities for intensifying faculty development regarding international classroom skills, it was decided to expand the existing Faculty Development Workshop on Managing Diversity in the International Classroom with a coaching and reflection module. In the new set up, participants have to write an action report following the workshop, in which they reflect on what they learned and how they plan to implement it in teaching (both course design, and guiding tutorial groups). In an individual session, they receive feedback from the trainer on this report. As a final step, participants have to write a short report on the implementation of their action plan. This new setup was introduced in the Summer of 2013, and the first experiences are very positive:

- The new setup gives an excellent opportunity to respond to the individual development and needs of the participants. Learning points and challenges appear to differ widely across participants.
- The fact that the module is part of the University Teaching Qualification Trajectory in SBE (in Dutch "Basis Kwalificatie Onderwijs" or BKO), makes staff motivated to follow the training and the module. This trajectory is mandatory for staff on tenure track, but it is also popular with young tutors and Ph.D. students without tenure track. In general, new staff appears to be more motivated to work on their teaching skills, and the Qualification adds to this motivation.

Although in the short run not all teaching staff is reached by this module, the fact that it is embedded in the University Teaching Qualification Trajectory in SBE implies that in the long run (almost) all staff will be trained in diversity skills.

Integration into the curriculum

An important principle in designing the programme was to integrate activities fully into the curriculum. Effectiveness of behavioural training largely depends on the degree to which they are integrated with day-to-day activities of participants. Experiences with the first stage made clear that this is required to an even larger extent than originally envisaged. Activities should be part of courses granting credits (ECTS) to students, and within courses, they should get substantial weight by being part of the final grade (e.g. through exam

questions, graded learning reports, graded project tasks, etc.). In SBE, many students indicated they prefer graded projects instead of pass / fail assignments.

International classroom activities can be integrated into the curriculum in basically two ways, both having their pros and cons:

1. Integrating activities in regular courses has the big advantage that they are considered a “normal” part of the curriculum. Studies on the effectiveness of trainings invariably point at the importance of connecting trainings to regular work practice. However, weaving activities into an existing curriculum is a very time intensive process, as we experienced in SBE. Tasks and activities have to be connected to existing course material and the connection across courses needs to be managed. This requires a lot of coordination efforts.
2. Developing international classroom competencies in separate skills trainings has exactly the opposite pros and cons compared to the integrative approach. The big advantage is that one can work with specialized staff, and that coordination costs are reduced. The big challenge is how to connect it to regular activities of students (so as to assure effectiveness) and how to work with students who are less motivated.

For the development of intercultural competencies in year 2 and 3 of the Bachelors, the second approach was chosen. A pilot was started in the academic year 2013-2014. The goal is to gradually increase the number of participating students.

4. Potential implications for other institutions

The experiences in SBE illustrate once again that the development of intercultural competencies is strongly context bound: what works well in one setting, does not necessarily work out well elsewhere. Lessons from other institutions can be very relevant, but have to be translated to the specific context. This will always require time and resources. Even within one university, different study programmes might demand different approaches. Pilots, adaptation on the spot and creativity are indispensable.

The following aspects might play a role in judging the degree to which the experiences of SBE could be of importance for other settings:

1. The size of the school (the smaller it is, the easier it is to develop pilots in ad-hoc fashion and get modification of the study programme approved by the organisation);
2. The composition of the student population (easier with an equal distribution among many nationalities; more challenging with big majorities);
3. The language of education (English as lingua franca, or national language);
4. The education system (problem based learning, other forms of student centered learning, or lecture based learning);
5. Prior intercultural experience of students, combined with age and maturity (more advanced learning in later years of study);

- Differences in interests and attitudes between students and staff of different faculties, especially regarding activities concerning communication and group dynamics (e.g. economics and business versus social work or psychology).

5. Conclusion

Integration of an international classroom into the curriculum is indispensable and challenging at the same time. The role of teaching staff is vital in motivating students and transmitting skills. The best is to incorporate international classroom development immediately at the initial design of a study programme or when the number of students is still small. If this opportunity has been forgone, a step-by-step approach, working with pilots and smaller programmes, and extending the curriculum year-by-year seems to be most effective.

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