IntlUni THE CHALLENGES OF THE MULTILINGUAL AND MULTICULTURAL LEARNING SPACE

# Illustrative Samples

A supplement to the IntlUni Principles for quality teaching and learning in the multilingual and multicultural learning space

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# Illustrative Samples of good practice in the multilingual and multicultural learning space (MMLS)

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*In 2013/2014 examples of good practice were collected at the partner institutions and subsequently used to develop the IntlUni principles for quality teaching and learning in the multilingual and multicultural learning space. Some of these examples have been rewritten as illustrative samples of good practice. While one hat does not fit all, and not all of the examples can be transferred into another educational context and academic culture without changes at all, there is a richness of ideas and inspiration to be gleaned from them, and they are therefore made available as part of the IntlUni final outcomes.*

The illustrative samples, following below, are organized in accordance with the IntlUni Principles:

| Dimension (actor) | Focus of activity (process) | Quality principles (conditions) |
|---|---|---|
| **1. The institution** | Educational context & institutional environment | 1. Providing an inclusive learning space<br>1.1 Providing institutional support for learning-conducive environments<br>1.2 Integrating students and staff in the institution |
| **2. The teacher** | Educational processes | 2. Raising awareness about teaching and learning processes<br>2.1 Reflecting on teaching approaches and negotiating learning processes<br>2.2 Managing and leveraging diversity |
| **3. The student** | Educational outcomes | 3. Developing one's own cultural identity and extending one's knowledge base<br>3.1 Benefitting from awareness of cultural differences and the ability to deal with linguistic diversity<br>3.2 Acquiring and applying contextual and intercultural knowledge to different cultural contexts |

Table 1: Overview of the IntlUni principles for quality teaching and learning in the multilingual and multicultural learning space.

# Dimension 1: Educational context & institutional environment

## 1.1 Providing institutional support for learning-conducive environments

The following example describes a program at an institution which is focused on providing a learning conducive and supportive space for incoming international students. The program described below represents an almost ready-to-use example of how institution-wide strategies can be implemented on the ground to produce a learning-conducive environment. It also extends from the classroom into the informal curriculum.

One of the basic challenges for the MMLSs is creating a framework where educational experiences between students can be exchanged and shared. A safe zone needs to be established where international students can reflect on the knowledge, beliefs and experiences they each bring with them as guest students and then subsequently consider these against the new learning culture they are encountering.

To meet this challenge, one university in northern Europe offers an introductory course for all new international students entitled the *Foundation Course.* The course emphasizes academic preparation for addressing, e.g., the university's specific learning culture that focuses on problem oriented project work and group work, and, most of all, students' responsibility for their own learning.

At the heart of this university's educational philosophy is the belief that learning takes place in a community with others. This philosophy runs through the entire university, from the learning cultures where educational activities are organized in project groups (also formally assessed in groups) to the university architecture where educational activities are organized in units, so-called houses, with group rooms, kitchens and local staff.

A great deal of important knowledge exists informally in these communities and it is therefore of great importance that the international students get access to it very quickly. From the first course day, the students encounter activities aimed at assisting them to access existing communities and create new networks. Local volunteer students participate actively with social and academic activities. Inclusion of both these elements, social and academic, leads to success for student integration.

The ultimate goal of this course is to empower the international students, to a greater extent, to consider themselves as a part of the local learning culture, and develop more confidence using peer learning. This is achieved through a transfer of knowledge about university learning in informal knowledge networks via introductory lectures in problem oriented project work. Experience has shown that this is generally a challenge, since most international students have worked with problem-based learning (PBL) – just not to the extent or format that it is practiced at this university. In addition, in instances when lectures alone do not meet student needs, this institution has the capacity and vision to experiment with inclusion of methods from collaborative and narrative learning theories.

Implementation of this type of institution-wide initiatives, based on the idea of authenticity and equality, takes time. Most local volunteers are only active for a course or two, resulting in a great deal of reinvention from semester to semester. In particular, the content in the narratives often need to be recreated every time in order to match the student population. Therefore, the focus for the course teacher must also take into account not only teaching students but also teaching the volunteers.

This university's experience and student evaluations show that in most cases this strategy leads to success regarding the student's integration. In addition, successful implementation of the *Foundation Course* has resulted in a profound knock-on effect. New evaluations show that the networks created throughout the course also benefit the students who do not participate in the course. The combined social and academic behavior introduced in the *Foundation Course* is reproduced by course participants actively transferring their acquired knowledge in the various environments they occupy: the academic houses, the dormitory, social media space such as Facebook, etc. While this synergic effect was not expected, it supports the hypothesis that it pays off working for a community creating culture.

### 1.2 Integrating students in the institution

This example adds an explicit condition for providing an inclusive learning space. The course activities described below show how in-class activities can promote a multiplicity of perspectives and move students away from habitual stereotyping.

Based on experience from a previously taught course, a lecturer at a university wanted to expand a dialogue that developed on the topic "Encounters with the Foreign". So, in her advanced European Studies course, this lecturer focused on the relationship between the home and the foreign, on all its levels, self/other, us/them, etc., and assigned a book written by a cultural anthropologist that discusses one's relationship to space after a war, in particular, a war from the local region. The discussion of the chosen text was left to the end of the semester.

With about 40 students enrolled in the course, 8 of which were Erasmus students and the remainder local students, the lecturer separated the book in parts with mixed groups of students (both Erasmus and local) responsible for each of these parts. Their task was to write a short critical summary of the part they were responsible for and generate four critical questions for discussion. The lecturer felt it was vital to mix the students in their groups. Having Erasmus students in each of the groups provided a new lens through which to view the text. She stated that "the Erasmus students lacked knowledge of how history/politics about the [local] conflict is taught in [local] schools and due to this they were more receptive to the [foreign] point of view."

As was expected, the Erasmus students read the text with an openness one has when one reads something that is distant and foreign. Because of this they were more able to remain focused on the issues raised by the book as opposed to assuming, presupposing, filling in the blanks, projecting or personalizing which was a tendency evident in some of the local students' assessment of the book. In other words, what the Erasmus students brought into the discussion of the book was a strong sense of measure and balance that would not have been possible had the group consisted of only local national students. The presence of the Erasmus students in the classroom allowed the multiplicity of perspectives on a controversial issue to be heard and for a productive discussion to be effected. More importantly, it allowed a number of local national students to engage with the book in more thoughtful ways as the classroom environment was established in such a way that it did not require the local students to respond to the text in an "expected" or stereotypical way.

According to the lecturer, the local students “felt free, in other words, to think about alternative takes on the issue in a new way, and enter the space of difference emanating from this book with openness. The culturally diverse environment of that particular course was beneficial culturally and educationally to all students in that it allowed them to see the difference in terms of receptivity to texts that are closer to home as opposed to those that are foreign to us.“

## Dimension 2: Educational processes

### 2. Raising awareness about teaching and learning processes

The following two examples show how specific opportunities may be used to make what is often tacit knowledge more explicit. Through direct intervention, activities at these universities seek to raise awareness about issues related to language proficiency and the teaching and learning process.

### 2.1a Reflecting on teaching approaches and negotiating learning processes

In this case, the challenge relates to dealing with linguistic/academic cultural issues encountered by a native English speaking (NS), Australian lecturer at a non-Anglophone, European university; the lecturer taught EMI humanities seminars where discussion and debate form the basis of knowledge transmission.

This particular BA program was comprised mostly of local non-native English speaking (NNS) students and a group of Erasmus students, made up of a few NS students as well as a blend of NNS, mostly from the Mediterranean countries. At this university, lecturers are only obligated to accept exchange students with formal learning agreements, especially in the introductory seminars, which can have 40+ students. However, it can be difficult to turn away students who want to take a specific course. Still, the more advanced undergraduate seminars should ideally be smaller, because they’re dealing with much more difficult material. With this in mind, lecturers are required to close class enrollments and turn students away who do not possess appropriate pre-requisite skills for success in a course. This is often difficult to negotiate with students and manage with administration.

In addition to the usual issues of sufficient English-language proficiency of some Erasmus exchange students, issues regarding student/teacher roles and expectations also arose. The academic culture of this university is very traditional. Students maintain a respectful distance from their lecturers, including using titles and surnames when addressing them in class. The local educational system also tends to utilize traditional teacher fronted lecturing as a didactic style. The local system typically does not require students to articulate unique arguments in their written work, but instead relies on standardized writing assignments and exams. In comparison, in terms of teaching style and an academic history with the Australian higher educational system, the lecturer for this specific course favors an Anglo-American approach, which she describes as “more provocative” and “encourages students to come up with their own ideas and think”. She enjoys being on a first-name basis with the students and encourages interaction in her classes to as great an extent as possible.

In order to generate more discussion and debate in her classes, the lecturer explained her teaching style at the beginning of the seminar and made her expectations clear regarding how students should approach their reading assignments, ways to participate in class (oral participation), and how to complete written assignments. In addition, she conferred with her colleagues in the department who had had international teaching experience and also preferred a more Anglo-American approach.

As a result of this experience and intervention, course admission policy has changed. Now, in order to enroll in the seminar, participants must have a minimum of CEFR C1 level English language proficiency (all home students on the program are tested prior to admission). In addition, the seminar now begins with an introductory session outlining the student/teacher roles and expectations. These initiatives have been put into place to create a more homogeneous group, in terms of both language proficiency and awareness of the differing teaching style and/or academic culture.

### 2.1b Reflecting on teaching/learning styles and negotiating learning processes

The following example reflects the use of peer interaction to lead to greater awareness and student autonomy. Through peer counselling, students become aware of differing learning styles and can draw on each other's experience for greater academic success.

The Language Centre (LC) at one university hosts many foreign students. They come from different learning cultures and have specific learning experiences. Sometimes it is difficult for them to use their own learning strategies in the foreign language courses at the Centre. They need help. There are, of course, also local students who need support for exam preparation or want to improve their foreign language learning. Working with these heterogeneous groups of students presents a challenge in the classroom.

To address this challenge, 8 students were employed as peer tutors at the LC's Self Learning Centre. The peer tutors work 6 hours per week, providing individual language learning advice to students. Students at the Language Centre come to the tutors with different concerns: some want to talk about their language learning difficulties, others want to expand their repertoire of language learning strategies, while the others want to speak about their motivation or search for specific materials for exam preparation. The peer tutors support the students by helping them to help themselves; this is achieved by means of conducting personal conversations based on the principles of non-directive counseling. The students become more autonomous in learning, self-confident and can achieve better results in learning foreign languages.

Both the students and the peer tutors have benefitted from this project. Besides the obvious benefit to the students, who are supported in their learning outside of the courses, the experience of the tutors is an additional benefit of the project. The tutors find their work fulfilling, and discover the new skills that they acquire, particularly communication and autonomous learning skills, useful for their personal development and future professional work.

The project has shed light on the various needs of students learning languages in different ways. Moreover different language learning biographies allow the students to be treated individually, creating an atmosphere of respect and acknowledgement.

## Dimension 3: Educational outcomes

### 3. Developing one's own cultural identity and extending one's knowledge base

The following three examples offer insight into the challenges and opportunities for raising learners' and instructors' awareness concerning different general academic cultures and also awareness of language-specific disciplinary cultures.

### 3.1a Benefiting from awareness of cultural differences and the ability to deal with linguistic diversity

In an English-medium instruction course, the students' various approaches to the course material and their divergent academic cultures are expressed and can be discussed and explored in the course.

The particular course mentioned concerns "advertising meaning", the meaning of images, brand reputations and product or company identities. The main challenge in the course concerns establishing the basic background for key questions concerning their purposes such as "what do we talk about when we talk about meaning?", "what do we refer to when we refer to a brand's reputation," and more specifically "how is this reputation measured, and how is it grasped?"

It is through dealing with the basic questions that students' academic cultural orientations are revealed. Students from an Anglo-American background consider meaning to be countable and apply quantitative measures to grasp it, such as questionnaires, large-scale surveys and even quantitative content analysis. On the other hand, students from other backgrounds see meaning as something which is uncountable and which can be grasped from a qualitative approach, and thus they use other methods of analysis to approach the basic questions.

For lecturers, the challenge has been to be aware of these differences, to let them come to the surface and then to make students aware of the consequences of carrying out research from these different points of view at different research institutes and in different countries. For students, a common practice is that they are asked to approach the problem from a point of view other than the one they would initially adopt. In that way, the students who would naturally use a quantitative approach are asked to develop a qualitative approach, and vice versa.

A result of this process is commonly the understanding of differing approaches used to measure "meaning", a general understanding about how to carry out research concerning advertising campaigns, and more importantly, a full awareness of the consequences of using one approach or another. Thus, students are not only made aware of their own academic approaches to problems, but learn how to expand and develop their repertoire of approaches in a mutually supportive environment.

### 3.1b Benefiting from awareness of cultural differences and the ability to deal with linguistic diversity

At a university in northern Europe, a Master's program integrating business and environmental approaches attracts a combination of local and international students from a variety of linguistic and disciplinary backgrounds. Although all students must pass certain entrance exam requirements, they all may not have the academic language skills for learning content in English.

To address this situation, an instructor from the English Language Center and one from the Master's program merged two complementary classes together to create a language and content integrated course where the learning outcomes and skills required overlapped and complemented each other. Integration was carefully planned; both teachers learned what the other one was actually teaching in his/her sessions and both observed each other's teaching: learning outcomes, teaching methods, activities, major assignments were negotiated.

Learning outcomes for both language and content were developed side by side, and students were carefully informed about the joint course structures. While learning about content, students also learned how to communicate professionally both orally and in writing following the field-specific, academic conventions. The results of integrating content and discipline-specific language were quite positive: integration was seen as useful, meaningful and motivating, and using authentic materials and scaffolding and incorporating assignments were seen to support learning when it comes to content and language. Furthermore, the skills learned in the integrated course have added to the quality of Master's theses and aided in the transition to work life.

### 3.1c Benefiting from awareness of cultural differences and the ability to deal with linguistic diversity

At one university, differing interpretations of what constitutes academic culture in the international university have led to problems for both students and staff. These problems include failed examinations, low marks, and misunderstandings in relation to academic expectations. In an effort to address these problems, a cross-discipline and university-wide program of sharing information and ideas has been established and a professional advisory board and student advisory board are planned.

The goals of these steps are to make explicit different expectations for academic writing and communication due to differences in disciplinary, academic and national cultures, to offer activities that encourage and develop different academic writing and thinking skills, and to create a space for discussing and exchanging information among students and lecturers. These initiatives are driven by a process- and reflective approach to writing and communication and involve cooperation with a variety of degree programs across the university.

This strategy, which is currently under development, envisages knowledge concerning academic expectations, skills and communication to be disseminated via workshops, events and a blog. Furthermore, it is a goal to increase networking via these activities among international students and staff. Also it is a goal to use user-generated content concerning these issues in the classroom context.

### 3.2 Acquiring and applying contextual and intercultural knowledge to different cultural contexts

The following example provides an explanation of the extension of context and culture across borders, and shows the value of diversity as a resource for this extension in the classroom.

At one university's Medical Bachelor's program, professional development is emphasized throughout the semesters. Groups of ten students work with a medical doctor, who acts as a coach, to investigate what it means to be a professional in the medical world. Professionalism is defined "as a phenomenon with three domains: a personal domain, an interpersonal domain, and a societal/organizational domain," and coaching meetings allow students "to develop accountability and reflection skills in those three domains."

Reflection skills are addressed in assignments in the coaching meetings which are designed specifically for the medical context. In one example, students watched two documentaries concerning cultural approaches towards dealing with the terminally ill. One documentary was set in the local university culture, and the other was set in North Africa. With this strategy students are encouraged to reflect on sociocultural contextual factors that affect medical practice. This experience may help students develop intercultural awareness and transparency and give the students a broader context for discussion.

This particular experience has led students to reflect on a variety of cultural perspectives in a constructive exchange, moving beyond the local cultural context. For example, one student described his experience in working with this assignment noting that it was important not only to integrate medical issues with cultural ones, but the students themselves realized that they are part of a multicultural group. It was also reported that valuable learning happened in these meetings not necessarily when participants agreed on issues or experienced things in the same way, but when issues were seen and discussed from different angles.


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