

Topic 1.3: Importance of Multiculturalism

1. Why is multiculturalism important?

The ignorance of our fellow human beings is perhaps the most important challenge that mankind must deal with. Without differences, people cannot recognize what each of us has in common. This is the only way to work towards a truly egalitarian world (MacPherson, 2007).

Multiculturalism is important because it reduces ignorance and dissolves disunity. It is essential because it promotes dialogue, often between cultures that are fundamentally different and have completely different points of view. It is a significant factor in softening the indifference of tolerance and embracing it with the genuine humanity of acceptance. It builds a bridge between the gap of tolerance and acceptance. People, regardless of their cultural differences, strive to do the best they can for their families and live in the most peaceful and harmonious world possible. These two goals unite all of us. Multiculturalism turns the idealistic and selfless idea of loving one's fellow man into a tangible possibility instead of a blurred philosophical concept. Multiculturalism is an antidote to ignorance (MacPherson, 2007).

What does humanity gain if we simply tolerate one another's presence in our society? What is the benefit? Where is the nobility in sheer tolerance? This narrow-minded approach doesn't lead to positive changes. We as a species are bound by our own cultural short-sightedness if we ignore the philosophical, ideological or spiritual knowledge about our fellows. It is both chauvinistic and dangerous to believe that there is no value in understanding the differences between our global neighbours. It is our responsibility to exploit the best of existing differences for the benefit of as many of us as possible, thus creating a climate of trust rather than mistrust (MacPherson, 2007).

2. Growing internationalization at higher education institutions

Over the past 40 years, the internationalisation of higher education has developed different forms and directions. In the seventies and early eighties, internationalisation in many countries was mainly concentrated in the field of development cooperation and aid. In the second half of the eighties, internationalization moved into a different direction. Thanks to the development of scholarship and mobility programmes, in particular the ERASMUS

programme, most countries in continental Europe focused their aid on student and teacher exchanges and curriculum development. In contrast, in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia, the focus shifted from aid to trade. Instead of providing scholarships, universities were forced by their governments to charge full-cost fees to international students. Contrary to expectations, it has been quite surprising to see that this has not led to a decline, but to a significant increase in the number of international students, with the UK being number 2 and Australia number 5 in accepting international students seeking full degrees abroad, behind the United States and close to Germany and France (Wit, Deca and Hunter, 2015, p. 5).

The internationalization of education has increased in recent decades, leading to a reduction in cultural dissonance between host countries and international students (Croese, 2011). However, criticism concerning higher education (Bok, 2006) questions the success of higher education in preparing students to succeed in a globalized world. A recent report (Chun & Evans, 2016) shows that the development of intercultural competence in undergraduate studies is generally neglected (MacGregor and Esmail, 2018, p. 2).

The growing internationalization leads to a higher need of intercultural and multicultural understanding between international and national students and teachers at universities. In the following chapters you will read about specific teaching strategies that support the teaching of students of different nationalities and avoid misunderstandings with students of different nationalities.

3. Teaching strategies

International students often experience frustration, fear and confusion when confronted with unfamiliar teaching and learning methods. While literature focuses on understanding the culture shock experienced by international students, it is equally important to examine the "learning shock" they encounter. Griffiths, Winstanley, & Gabriel (2005) define learning shock as "experiences of acute frustration, confusion and anxiety experienced by some students who find themselves exposed to unfamiliar learning and teaching methods, bombarded by unexpected and disorienting cues and subjected to ambiguous and conflicting expectations" (p. 276). A large number of international students are among the brightest minds from their home countries and are highly motivated to succeed. However, when a learning shock occurs,

the students' ability to learn in a new environment can be impaired as they have to adapt to different academic behaviors and expectations (Bhattacharyya, 2008). The following teaching strategies create effective conditions and require students to work together and actively participate in the learning process, while providing opportunities to develop intercultural competence (MacGregor and Esmail, 2018, p. 5).

3.1 Creating an inviting classroom environment

A challenge for lecturers in higher education is to create conditions for an inclusive learning environment that supports the participation of all students and the appreciation of different cultural perspectives. The dissonance experienced by international students in the process of acculturation at a host university is documented and influences the quality of their experiences (Croese, 2011). Offering students a supportive, encouraging and nonthreatening learning environment is an essential part of addressing the complex needs of a diverse group of students, especially when teaching international students. By appreciating and understanding cultural differences, teachers can address "inequalities that exist in order to balance access to learning opportunities and equal engagement of all students" (Croese, 2011, p. 389), which will enable a smoother transition to a new academic environment (MacGregor and Esmail, 2018, pp. 3-4).

3.2 Getting to know your students

In order to create an inviting classroom atmosphere, time should be provided for students to get to know each other and for informal interactions between students and between the teacher and students (Croese, 2011). Planning an 'ice-breaker' activity at the beginning of the semester gives students and the teacher an opportunity to get to know each other while creating a positive learning environment and developing a sense of community in the classroom. Types of 'ice-breakers' include an initial 'get to know each other' activity, a game, solving a quiz or 'brain teaser' (MacGregor and Esmail, 2018, p. 4).

If students respond with personal information, commonalities are identified early on. Through this activity, both host country and international students begin the process of getting to know each other and eventually building connections and relationships that might otherwise not develop. Krajewski (2011) explains that "the basis for cultural competence is constituted by what each participant brings to the intercultural encounter in terms of openness and curiosity,

a feature that may need constant attention in order to remain active" (p. 141), and emphasizes that intercultural competence has to be developed over time. This type of activity enables students to start developing intercultural competence at the beginning of the semester (MacGregor and Esmail, 2018, p. 4).

3.3 Addressing language barriers

International students indicate that a lack of language skills in the host country is an obstacle to their academic success (Halic, Greenberg and Paulus, 2009). Challenges that students must face include threatened self-esteem, difficulty expressing thoughts and ideas, confusion, misunderstandings, stress, anxiety and difficulties with course content. As a result, these students may be perceived by faculty and peers as ignorant and "non-legitimate contributors to the learning community" (Halic, Greenberg and Paul, 2009, p. 82). Krajewski (2011) stated that "language proficiency is undeniably a prerequisite to get in touch with other people and to be able to communicate" (p. 150). Thus, it is an essential basis of the process of developing intercultural competence.

It is crucial to understand that students may experience difficulties due to language barriers and develop strategies which help them to overcome these obstacles. Following lectures is part of the classroom experience and can be difficult for students not fluent in the language of the host country. To solve this problem, teachers can use the university's e-learning platform to provide students with files containing lecture notes or outlines before each class, which can be read, printed or stored on electronic devices. The notes serve as a guideline as the lecturer progresses through the lectures and class activities. Another option is to record lectures in class and publish them on the e-learning platform, giving students the opportunity of reviewing the presented content. Universities often appreciate the benefits of creating short videos to explain complex concepts or highlight key messages from assigned readings (MacGregor and Esmail, 2018, pp. 4-5).

3.4 Engaging students in discussion

Although the lecture is a standard approach to teaching, student participation in discussions is crucial to the learning process and has the potential to increase student engagement (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). Through discussion, students are encouraged to think more critically, become better listeners and receive and give constructive feedback. It provides an

opportunity “to recognize, respect, and turn the ‘cultural baggage’ that each student brings to the classroom into a positive experience for all” (De Vita, 2000, p. 174). However, due to cultural standards, language difficulties, shyness, the fear of being misunderstood or the worry of being ridiculed, international students tend to be reluctant to participate in class discussions (De Vita, 2000).

To encourage international students to participate in class discussions, Crose (2011) suggests offering discussion topics outside of class so that they can “more adequately prepare for classroom discussions and formulate some of their responses in advance” (p. 391). The teacher should publish information on upcoming discussion topics, a list of tasks that should be done to prepare for class, and links to documents and online sources relevant to the topic. This gives students the opportunity to explore different aspects of the topic before the class meeting. When the class meets, if it is a face-to-face session, students can be divided into small groups that reflect the diversity of the class to participate in the assigned discussion topic (MacGregor and Esmail, 2018, pp. 4-5).

3.5 Project-oriented group activities

Involving students in cross-cultural, project-oriented group activities has the potential to promote the acquisition of content-based knowledge, the practical application of this knowledge and the understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity (Crose, 2011).

Collaborative learning has its roots in constructivist learning theories, and Vygotsky (1980) emphasized the importance of the social environment in learning, “asserting that learning is essentially a social act: one cannot learn meaningfully without some sort of person-to-person interaction taking place” (Micari & Pazos, 2014, p. 250). Group work enables the exploration of different viewpoints, promotes dialogue between students, facilitates academic success and improves learning (Crose, 2011; De Vita, 2000). Compared to discussion group activities, the goal of project-oriented group activities is for every group to create a product relevant to the focus and content of their course. The objectives of project activities require students to participate in subject-related projects that allow them to share their ideas while applying their skills and appreciating the differences in the perspectives of the group members, thereby contributing to the development of a cross-cultural learning community. Project-based learning (PBL) is a research-based instructional approach that enables students to engage in

complex and critical thinking while improving communication and collaboration skills (Lee et al., 2014).

Providing guidelines, structures and technological tools for group projects to students contributes to a more successful learning experience. This is particularly helpful for international students who may have limited or no experiences with group-oriented activities (Sweeney, Weaven and Herington, 2008). The composition of students within each group is an important aspect to consider. Students tend to select classmates with similar cultural backgrounds when they have the opportunity to form their own groups (De Vita, 2000). Collaborative groups, involving students from different cultural backgrounds, ensure that each group reflects the diversity of the class and gives students the opportunity to explore a task "through the eyes of different cultural backgrounds" (Sweeney, Weaven and Herington, 2008, p.129). The decision on the size of the group depends on the type of the assigned activity, but a general rule is no more than four to six students per group (MacGregor and Esmail, 2018, pp. 8-9).

Simply building a group is not enough to create a group identity that is free of prejudice and stereotypes. In addition, individuals within the group should have equal status and should be involved in achieving a common goal, supported by a teacher. A regularly used practice to empower students to take responsibility for group processes is asking each group to prepare a written 'contract'. Each member of the group has to sign this 'contract', which sets out the basic rules they agree to follow (i.e. meeting deadlines, arriving for meetings prepared and on time, listening politely, behaving constructively, etc.). Ideally, the group members themselves should assign roles (e.g. facilitator, minute-taker, devil's advocate, presenter) to ensure each member contributes meaningfully to the assignment. If multiple group activities are assigned during the term, students can change roles within the group so that they can gain a variety of experiences within a group dynamic (MacGregor and Esmail, 2018, pp. 8-9).

3.6 Extending interactions outside the classroom

While changes in teaching practices will enhance the experience of international students, they have academic and social needs that are beyond the walls of the classroom. Both faculty-student and student-student interactions are important for developing a sense of belonging to the academic culture (MacGregor and Esmail, 2018, p. 11).

3.6.1 Faculty-student interactions

Faculty characteristics that signal that they are "approachable, caring, and understanding are all traits that international students seek from their professors at host institutions" (Croese, 2011, p. 389). The relevance of faculty-student interactions outside the classroom context refers to an increase in academic performance and a higher level of course satisfaction regardless of demographic characteristics (Young & Sax, 2009). Personal feedback from the faculty is important for most students and especially for international students. "Feedback is not merely concerned with knowledge transfer, but is a form of social interaction that is invaluable to the process of cultural learning" (Tian & Lowe, 2013, p. 593). Email and e-learning discussion forums provide an easily accessible tool for building supportive relationships with students. An example of how to establish or strengthen these relationships is by posting short supportive comments acknowledging students' contributions in class or online (MacGregor and Esmail, 2018, pp. 12-13). International students reported being reluctant to initiate personal interactions with the faculty, as this sometimes reflects the students' need to keep a sense of self-esteem (Bartram, 2008).

3.6.2 Student-student interactions

Social contact between international and host students is another important aspect for the well-being of international students (MacGregor and Esmail, 2018, p. 13). Despite its importance, international students report that it is difficult to make friends with host students and that host students often do not voluntarily interact or participate in activities with international students (Croese, 2011). Using the popularity of social networking sites to expand and improve communication between students in a social way within the academic context is useful, as social media plays an essential role in the process of acculturation and in the development of social capital (Tess, 2013).

4. Conclusion

The ideas discussed in this chapter focused on pedagogical approaches that address the need for teaching reforms in higher education. This need is justified by the increasing number of students representing various forms of cultural diversity. Moreover, the current trend towards globalization challenges universities to meet the needs of an ever-growing community of

international students. The dissonance experienced by culturally diverse students, both inside and outside the classroom, is well recognized (MacGregor and Esmail, 2018, pp. 16-17).

Awareness of the challenges these students are faced with is a first step in encouraging teachers to "to create more supportive environments for students from different cultural backgrounds to capitalize on each other's strengths" (Huang, 2012, p. 144).

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