

CULTURAL COMPETENCE FOR FIRST YEAR UNDERGRADUATES AND A LOT MORE

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Update to:

Herzfeldt, R (2007) “Cultural Competence of First Year Undergraduates”, in *Aston Business School Good Practice Guide to Teaching and Learning, Vol. 4, pp 23-29.*

<http://www1.aston.ac.uk/clipp/learning-innovation/ltr-good-practice-guides/>

Introduction

This article reflects on a seminal piece of work which was produced in the 2006/7 Good Practice Guide by Regina Herzfeldt (now Eckert). At the time Eckert was a PhD student in Aston Business School, working on a thesis which examined the effect of intercultural training for placement students. In fact she had already written an article on this work for the 2004/5 Good Practice Guide (pp.2-5). Since graduating from Aston, Eckert has been working for the Centre for Creative Leadership in Brussels.

The article in the 2006/7 Good Practice Guide (pp.23-29) on cultural competence for first year undergraduates was the result of research sponsored through one of HELM's¹ small research grants. It was an important article in many ways: because it looked forward to the needs of the multi-cultural business school we have become, but also because its findings have laid the foundation for major work with both students and staff across the University. In addition, it was a beautifully presented research paper. Many of the articles in these Good Practice Guides have been short reflections for practitioners. Eckert's work was a carefully developed research paper which, if she had had more time while writing up her PhD, would have found its way in to an international journal. It included a well constructed methodology, and as a result the findings are generalisable and have been the basis for work which has been published since. The article also is a precursor to the ones being produced by our colleagues in the third module of their Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice. So in many ways than one, this article was ahead of its time.

Cultural Adjustment

In this paper Eckert looked back on the literature on adjustment to new cultures (Takeuchi et al, 2005 and Masgoret, 2006). She believed that the relationship “between prior cultural experience and cultural competence in general, ...has rarely been addressed” and so she set out to ask, with specific reference to Aston Business School undergraduates: “Is there a positive relationship between cultural experience and cultural competence in students starting at ABS?” (p.24).

In addition, Eckert looked at the work of (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoer, 2000) which says that “besides cultural experience, a second individual characteristic potentially important for cultural competence is personality ... this research suggests that multicultural personality, specifically the facets of open-mindedness and social initiative, might be positively related to cultural competence” (p.24). This led to Eckert's second important research hypothesis: “Is there a positive relationship between personality characteristics and cultural competence in students starting at Aston” (p.24).

¹ Centre for Higher Education Learning and Management

The data was collected from first year students studying on the Specialist Business Skills (overseas students) and Foundations of Management (Home/EU students) modules, and “students completed a test of cultural competence and measures of their prior cultural contact” (p.24). Nearly 300 students agreed that their data could be used for this research (163 were Home, 63 from other countries). The results showed that “on average, cultural competence rises linearly with each additional cultural experience ... An interesting finding emerged for nationality. It was related in cultural competence in such a way that students with a British nationality showed lower cultural competence than students with international background. ... Though this finding was startling, it could be explained by the different amount of cultural experience British and international students had.” (p.26)

Theoretical Framework and Practice

The second finding which has had a great deal of influence on practice in Aston Business School is “positive relationships between personality characteristics and all facets of cultural contact. Students with much cultural contact have higher social initiative and open-mindedness. ... The experience of cultural contact (number of cultures, duration, and intensity of contact with them) changes and forms students’ personality such that they become more open-minded and show more social initiative” (pp.26-7). This is the really important finding for future work: learning a second language or studying or working or studying abroad increases your ability to perform well in intercultural groups, either at University or in the work place. In terms of my own research and practice Eckert’s work has been central. When I gave my inaugural lecture in 2008 I chose to showcase the work I had developed as a result of Eckert’s work (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e47xmZ8eoFs>). This activity has been developed further since and forms the basis of a contribution to the Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice – this means that all new lecturers have the benefit of Eckert’s work and it can influence their own practice.

My work builds on Eckert’s in both research and practice. My own teaching practice encompassing an increasingly diverse student population got me thinking about how I could maximise the learning experience and achievement of both home and overseas students. The theoretical framework I built up started with Eckert’s paper. I had become concerned about the lack of engagement from our home students in group work which involved multicultural groups. I found myself increasingly having to sort out disputes in which academically high performing home students were side-lining international students allocated to their groups. Many of these students had had little experience of culture from overseas – many did not speak a second language, most had little experience of time spent outside the UK. These students reacted to the different learning styles and language. If Eckert was right, these students would be helped by increasing their cultural capital and we had to provide them with opportunities to do this.

At the same time I was concerned about the performance of our overseas students. Our statistics showed that international students perform very well in their first year, but their performance is less good compared with their home counterparts in the second year and also in their degree classification attainment. I wanted to explore the reasons for this and to find a way to rectify it. My reading brought me to the work of Ippolito at the University of Brunel (2007). Ippolito asserts that ‘deficit’ models are often used to describe international students’ relationship to their study in the UK. The discourse is often that international students need to be helped to use a different and more UK-centric way of learning because their ways of learning are not appropriate. Ippolito sought to challenge this approach and to engender the notion that an international student’s way of learning is different, but just as valid. In my mission to increase the performance of overseas students I saw this research as very valuable. Helping students to understand the learning approaches that they would meet in the UK, while valuing their own backgrounds and using them to increase the cultural capital of their home-based classmates seemed a good way forward. I wanted to incorporate opportunities to develop activities based on Eckert and Ippolito’s work into the classroom.

At the same I was aware that the diversity of the student population was more complex than the division between home and overseas discussed above would suggest. Many home students came

from backgrounds which intermixed the two elements and many overseas students had more awareness of UK-centric learning approaches than was at first apparent, e.g. because they had been to boarding school in the UK. This brought me to the work of Welikalia and Watkins (2008) from the Institute of Education. These authors saw that, in a diverse, multicultural society categories are blurred. We all bring a story which is a complex combination of our birth, upbringing, education and live experience. We each had a different story. Welikalia and Watkins used story telling techniques to explore this diversity and complexity. I liked this approach because it did not stereotype students and acknowledged an increasingly inter-culturally, diverse world and student population.

Implications for Practice

Having established this theoretical background, I set about adapting it to the student learning experience at Aston. I found a group of actors and artists who could make the theoretical framework come alive in the classroom. The MAP Consortium is a group of practicing artists and actors who use their techniques to facilitate learning within companies. Their work is of high quality and they are thoughtful practitioners. Together we developed interventions for all first year students at Aston to help them increase their awareness of difference, ambiguity and to increase the ability to work in multicultural teams. For the last five years the MAP Consortium members have worked with first year students to develop their skills. The outcomes have been stunning. Rather than rehearse again the full details of what we found I would refer you to two papers that we have written (Higson, 2008; Higson and Liu, 2012). The findings of these are clear and make proposals for future practice: arts based practice allows students to learning in a deeper way and creates cultural change more quickly. The workshops created a unique opportunity for students to engage with each other in an arena where language ability was not important. Results showed that students improved on almost every cultural intelligence scale and that those home students who did not speak a second language or spend time abroad learning or working improved the most. Students immediately had something that they could add back into their group work.

While the results were fantastic, they were restricted to this module and we wanted ways in which we could embed what we had learned into the learning community at Aston. We managed to persuade the Centre for Learning Innovation and Professional Practice (CLIPP) to invite the MAP Consortium to contribute to the Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice which all new academics had to take part in. This meant that new staff, across all areas of the University had to take part in deep learning experiences which got them to think about their teaching practice to diverse student groups. The idea was that they would all take this back into the classroom and the techniques and ways of looking at things would permeate towards all learners. The results (to be found in Higson, 2009) showed that participants learnt important intercultural skills which they could and are using in the classroom.

Eckert herself realised that these findings had important implications for practice in terms of undertaking group work in the increasingly international/multicultural Aston Business School and in ensuring that we increased the cultural competence of our students via language learning and undertaking an international placement. This has influenced both individual academic practice, but also the whole strategy of Aston University today. In the current Aston 2020 Strategy language learning and international placements form two key KPIs for strategy. In 2012/13 the University offered free language classes to all first year students and 20% of them have taken it up. Also in 2013/14, 29% of those on placement are undertaking this work abroad, an increase of 4% from the previous year and a far larger increase in the Schools of Life and Health Sciences and Engineering and Applied Science. I wonder whether Eckert knew, when she was completing her PhD at Aston just how influential she would be.

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Example used with first year undergraduate students
BS1101: Specialist Business Skills for International Students
and BS1131: Foundations of Management