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Citizens of somewhere: How a cross-cultural discussion group offers opportunities for intercultural understanding

Sarah Macdonald, Academic Support Lecturer, London College of Communication

Abstract

Increasing international student numbers in higher education institutions mean there is a need to address the challenges that these students face and make the most of the opportunities they bring. The internationalisation initiative 'Conversation Club' is a weekly discussion group for overseas and home students at London College of Communication (UAL), which is aimed at building community. This article discusses comments gathered from these student discussions alongside secondary research on the subject and explores the importance of an informal, out-of-classroom setting for providing an insight into student life that could be used to improve the experience of international students, while increasing home students' intercultural competency.

Keywords

internationalisation; intercultural competencies; inclusion; cultural stereotyping; silence; criticality

Worldwide, numbers of international students are projected to rise to 8 million by 2020 (Forest and Altbach, 2007 cited in Phakiti, Hirsh and Woodrow, 2016) and this internationalisation of higher education presents a wealth of opportunities. Building diverse communities is particularly important in confronting many of the problems facing the planet today, which cannot be solved by one nation and require global solutions and international cooperation. Despite this, we live in a country where the idea of international citizenship is questioned – the British Prime Minister recently equated being a 'citizen of the world' with being a 'citizen of nowhere' (May, 2016). Considering attitudes such as these, the need to address the challenges facing students studying abroad, and to make the most of the opportunities that internationalisation brings, is becoming more urgent.

In these uncertain political and economic times, continuing to uphold the inclusive values of higher education by providing a socially-just learning environment for all students is increasingly complex. On returning to the UK after teaching in higher and further education in Japan for seven years, I observed some worrying behaviours – exhibited by home students towards East Asian students – which suggested the existence of parochial and unreconstructed colonial attitudes. In addition to this, during one-to-one tutorials, a few international students expressed feelings of alienation. This prompted me to ask students about their experiences at London College of Communication (LCC, UAL) – where 46 per cent of our students are from overseas (UAL, 2017).

This article describes an ongoing internationalisation initiative, in the form of a cross-cultural discussion group known as 'Conversation Club' for students at LCC. Comments from this group prompted secondary research into four areas: exploring the difficulty of reading body language in another culture; attitudes towards international students; the misinterpretation of silence; and assumptions about 'criticality'. Using a small questionnaire (Appendix 1), designed to promote conversation, comments were gathered from both undergraduate and postgraduate international and EU students at LCC (in February 2017). This was not intended as empirical research, merely as a framework for discussion.

Context: Exploring the challenges some students face

As well as the challenges of living in a new environment and the shock of being immersed in a different culture, some students face a range of complex issues when they study in an unfamiliar place. Beyond the economic and linguistic difficulties that certain students may encounter, a few international students at LCC reported that they felt isolated and ignored in tutorials or discussions by some home students, who seemed to already have established their own groups of friends, and that they found making friends challenging.

It is possible that the challenges faced by international students are exacerbated by what Mayer and Salovey refer to as the removal of 'empathic emotional intelligence' (1993 cited by Haigh in Ryan, 2013, p.197). Haigh describes how interaction with others becomes problematic in a culture different to one's own because we are unable to 'read the cues, body language and codes that frame others' actions' (in Ryan, 2013, p.197). In an unfamiliar society, even the interpretation of simple gestures can cause confusion and this experience may produce reactions such as 'high anxiety, blind panic and depression' (Haigh in Ryan, 2013, p.198). For international students from cultures that are very different to that of the country they arrive in, these may be challenges that they were not prepared for.

The attitudes of others towards certain international students can cause further alienation. In response to the questionnaire (Appendix 1) which I gave to a small group of European and international students, one mainland Chinese student said she felt patronised by tutors who expected that she would not understand anything. Several students (Eastern European and mainland Chinese) said they had encountered ignorance about their countries and a lack of interest in their backgrounds, while one student (mainland Chinese) said she felt stereotyped and judged by her appearance. Indeed, cultural stereotyping and 'a lack of cross-cultural competence among teachers' have been identified as barriers to the active participation of international students by Turner (in Ryan, 2013, p.227/228). In addition, Finnigan has written about the 'othering' and problematising of students who 'do not fit the profile of the "normal art student" who may be perceived as white and middle class' (2009, p.135). Another mainland Chinese student mentioned the difficulty of 'understanding history and habits' and this may relate to the fact that some aspects of the curriculum are mainly based on Western culture. This is interesting in the context of what Gurnam Singh, Principal Lecturer at the University of Coventry and visiting fellow in race and education at UAL, has spoken about regarding decolonising the curriculum (2017). Similarly, the project started by students at University College London (UCL), *Why is my curriculum white?* (UCLTV, 2014), bemoans the fact that curricula in UK universities do not always reflect the diversity of the student population.

Other areas of difficulty that stem from stereotypical attitudes towards certain international students relate to silence and criticality. In contemporary Western culture, where verbosity and extraversion are often considered the norm, introversion and quietness can be undervalued (Cain, 2013). Quiet students may be misunderstood, and the student who chooses to remain silent, is often believed to be less able. As Turner says, in the Anglophone context, 'silence is often associated with a lack of personal power, social marginalisation, or even a lack of intellectual ability' (in Ryan, 2013, p.230). She goes on to mention the high context/low context classification of cultures by the anthropologist Edward Hall (1988 cited by Turner in Ryan, 2013) which assesses whether people are more inclined to express thoughts and feelings verbally, (as in low-context cultures) or are more community based and rely on their common backgrounds to explain, rather than using words (high context cultures). Consequently, people from high context cultures may regard verbal communication as less helpful in communicating meaning than those from low context cultures. For many students, silence could mean that they are thinking deeply about and engaging with ideas, rather than not connecting with them, as a 'deficit' model of their behaviour might suggest (Ryan, 2013, p.284). Mainstream Western culture's perception of verbosity as a positive attribute is certainly not universal and it is understandable that some students faced with such an attitude may find this challenging.

In addition to this, when some international students do communicate, it is likely that their language skills, which may not yet be fully developed, could be misinterpreted negatively. The use of unsophisticated language may be misunderstood as a 'lack of complex thought' (Ryan, 2013, p.284) and it is often assumed that certain students (often East Asian) lack criticality. According to a number of authors (HEA, 2014, p.3) some international students have reported 'feeling judged as lacking certain 'critical' skills' when they may just express criticality in a way that is unfamiliar to Westerners. As Ryan says, 'academics may be unaware that modes of expression of critical thinking in one system may be considered impolite or lacking in self-reflection in another' (2013, p.284). What constitutes critical thinking is defined in many ways, but it seems absurd to suggest that all students from a certain region of the world lack criticality. Rear argues that the 'contention that Asian students lack critical thinking [...] is a form of Othering' (2017, p.19). According to Yoshino, making assumptions about whether critical thinking skills exist or are absent in an entire culture 'is itself an example of a lack of criticality' (HEA, 2014, p.3). Referring to perceptions of Chinese learners, Ryan reminds us of China's '5,000 year history of academic excellence' and ancient philosophical traditions (2013, p.284). Rear points out that Confucius's ideas about reflection sound very similar to contemporary ideas about critical thinking (2017, p.24). This suggests that criticality has always been alive and well in this region. When negative stereotypes prevail and narrow definitions of criticality are applied to international students' work, it is no wonder that they feel judged.

Overcoming challenges and making the most of opportunities

Tackling these challenges is not only essential for retaining the inclusive values of the higher education system, it is also important to appreciate how the presence of international students at UK universities presents a wealth of opportunities. The benefits of internationalisation can be transformative for decades to come. For example, transcultural theory focuses on international education's potential for reciprocal learning, disregarding ideas about hegemony and cultural superiority and embracing partnership and mutual dialogue (Ryan, p.287). Moreover, mixing with international students can increase the cultural experiences of home students with a view to promoting intercultural understanding, something that is essential for young people's awareness of our global interdependency and the future of the planet (Bianchi, 2011, p.281). Unfortunately, UK students have been found to have less cultural competence than international students (Herzfeldt, 2007 cited by Higson and Lui in Ryan, 2013), so there is some work to be done. It is not helpful that certain prominent members of the UK government have recently exhibited an appalling lack of cultural sensitivity (Helm, Quinn and Dehghan, 2017, p.1). Better role models are needed in this interconnected world and the importance of intercultural exposure is essential for all students.

An internationalisation initiative at LCC

Addressing the issues surrounding internationalisation is a very complex area and extensive research and policy implementation across universities are required. In the short term, practical provisions at the grass roots level may be worthwhile. In an attempt to reduce the challenges faced by international students and make the most of the benefits of their presence, LCC Conversation Club was piloted in the summer term of 2016 and is continuing into 2017/18. The seed of the idea came from my Line Manager at the time, Zey Suka-Bill (Associate Dean of Progression, Attainment and Support, LCC), who suggested that I set up a discussion group because of my experiences working with international students in Japan. The aims of Conversation Club are to build community, encourage cross-cultural exchange and facilitate opportunities for storytelling that will create bonds across diverse cultures. Although originally aimed at overseas students, home students are also encouraged to attend.

Advertised using leaflets, posters and emails to students, the weekly discussion group is held for an hour on Wednesdays during term time in a classroom in LCC's tower block. It has been well attended at the beginning of both autumn terms, with around 25 students participating in some sessions, and then numbers have dwindled to six or seven as the term progressed. Despite emailing and reminding students about the group, attendance can sometimes be unpredictable, and strategies are needed to

improve this. Both postgraduate and undergraduate students have participated with a fairly even gender mix. In each academic year, several students have attended regularly and one student from the pilot in summer 2016 still comes occasionally. Each week is designated a theme, often generated by the students, and handouts with discussion questions and any relevant reading are prepared. Based on a model I used to facilitate discussion groups in Japan, I ask students to talk in pairs at first to maximise speaking time and to give reticent students a chance to be heard. After this, students share their conversations in a general discussion. LCC's International Student Experience Officer, Chris Bryant, often joins me and contributes to the discussion. We have found that background music creates a more relaxed atmosphere.

The topics discussed have included: culture shock, life in London, cinema, politeness in different cultures, gender, education and cultural appropriation. Participants have been mostly international, with some EU and only one or two home students. Interestingly, the attending home students have been mostly BAME students from various heritages. Countries represented so far have been: Bulgaria, Chile, China, Colombia, Ecuador, India, Iran, Italy, Malaysia, Nepal, Poland, The Philippines, Spain, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam. Students have made connections between cultures during their conversations and storytelling has played a large part. The discussions have been useful for dispelling stereotypes, for example during the gender discussion, one male student who came from a country not known for its promotion of women's rights expressed the most feminist opinions in the group, as well as a sensitivity to non-binary gender identities. On the other hand, at the end of the same discussion another male student from a Western European country made some inappropriate comments, before announcing that gender was too serious a topic to discuss and that next time we should look at something lighter. Perhaps his encounter with the feminist male student was perceived as an intercultural challenge. The European never returned to the group, so it was impossible to determine if he had broadened his horizons or improved what Reid and Spencer-Oatey would refer to as his intercultural competencies (in Ryan, 2013, p.127).

Listening to the diversity of student perspectives on various issues has been enlightening and useful. In a recent discussion about life in London, students from South America spoke about feeling so safe in London that it seemed like 'a walk in the park' compared to the cities they had been brought up in. On the other hand, the East Asian students attending that discussion said that they were nervous and concerned about their safety in London. Topics suggested by students at the beginning of the 2017/18 academic year included racism and police brutality; other countries' perceptions of Chinese culture; unusual idioms in English; and extreme political positions.

As well as providing cross-cultural exchange and community building for students, Conversation Club may have the potential to act as a place where information could be gathered to enhance intercultural training for staff and other students in the future. UAL already has an established Intercultural and Communication Training programme, but developing intercultural competence is an ongoing process. As McKinnon says, intercultural 'competence cannot be acquired in a short space of time or in one module. It is [...] a lifelong process which needs to be addressed explicitly in learning and teaching and staff development' (2013, p.1). Much has been written about intercultural competence and the frameworks used to measure it (Reid and Spencer-Oatey in Ryan, 2013; UNESCO, 2013). However, going into detail about competencies would be outside the scope of this case study. Some of those competencies worth mentioning include 'actively seek to understand unfamiliar behaviour', 'avoid judging people from other cultures on the basis of stereotypes' and 'acknowledge that different practices are sensible and meaningful in their cultural context and can add value to your own way of thinking' (Reid and Spencer-Oatey in Ryan, 2013, p.131).

The benefits of internationalisation are invaluable, but studying in another country can present an array of challenges. Gathering comments from international students, however anecdotal, has provided a useful insight into their experiences in the UK. It is hoped that more student stories will be

collected at LCC's Conversation Club, which is an attempt to build community across cultures in order to reduce some of the challenges that international students face. As students from different cultures meet and are exposed to a variety of ideas, there will always be new information shared and new perspectives gained. Hopefully this interaction will help students develop more intercultural awareness and send them on their way to becoming global citizens.

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Biography

Sarah Macdonald taught English and the arts in further and higher education in Japan from 2003 until 2010 and has lived and worked in France and the United States. She is passionate about literature, cinema and social justice and is a practising writer. Before moving to Japan, she wrote and edited for various publications in London and Scotland. She has science and arts degrees from the University of Edinburgh and Birkbeck College and an MA in Creative and Life Writing from Goldsmiths. As an academic support lecturer at London College of Communication, in addition to facilitating Conversation Club, she collaborates with colleagues to run creative writing sessions, lunchtime academic skills workshops and embedded classes in the Screen School.

Appendix 1 – Questions used for Discussion

LCC Conversation Club (22 February 2017)

Learning at UAL – the challenges of studying in another culture and the impact on your identity

- 1) What has the content of your course been like so far? Any surprises? Is there anything you expected to be included that hasn't been?
- 2) What do you think of the teaching methods at LCC? Are they different from what you experienced in your own country? Do you find that lecturers are sensitive to different cultures?
- 3) Have you experienced any stereotyping or what you perceive as different treatment because of your nationality or ethnicity at UAL? Can you give some examples?
- 4) Do you ever experience different treatment because of your English language skills? What kind of attitudes have you experienced? Do lecturers speak slowly and clearly enough for an international audience?

- 5) Do you ever find that lecturers assume you have certain background knowledge, for example references to UK culture or history? Can you give examples? How does this make you feel?
- 6) Do you find that lecturers or other students are interested in your background or country? Do you feel listened to?
- 7) What are the most difficult things about studying in another country? Have you developed strategies to cope with these?
- 8) Have you encountered any cultural misunderstandings? How have you dealt with these?
- 9) Is there anything that you would like to change at LCC that would provide a better experience for international students?
- 10) How do you think the experience of studying in a diverse environment has affected your identity? Do you feel that the experience has helped you to grow or change in any way?