Intercultural Teaching & Learning 101 Tool

Seven reflective questions to help you embed intercultural learning opportunities for your students

Dr Cliona O'Sullivan & Dr Aideen Quilty

Background

Cultural diversity is the norm rather than the exception in Higher Education. By leveraging the cultural diversity of our University community, students and staff can share insights and experiences and develop perspectives which will allow them to participate in an increasingly global and interconnected world. There is a need to incorporate an international and intercultural dimension into curricula to ensure that all graduates are equipped with the skills and attributes to participate in an interconnected global world and address global challenges.

Intercultural learning is about the opportunities and experiences of working with and learning from people across different cultures. This tool is designed for all teachers and tutors in UCD who wish to promote Intercultural Learning opportunities for their students in classes, modules and programmes.

The tool consists of seven reflective questions that may help you to create opportunities for your students to engage in Intercultural Learning. For each of the seven domains, suggestions and examples are given. The examples given will work in a physical teaching environment but also using online learning environments.

This tool is based on research undertaken in University College Dublin as part of Fellowship in Teaching and Academic Development 2019-2021 and review of international literature. Quotes included are data from focus groups conducted as part of this Fellowship and are used to illuminate concepts presented.

1. Orientation/Introduction

Reflective Questions:
Do students get an opportunity to introduce themselves to each other and to you on your module (and you to them)? Do students get the opportunity to interact informally perhaps during orientation at programme level or early in a module?

The first steps in meaningful intercultural dialogue is having the opportunity to tell one's own story. Students value the opportunity to simply introduce themselves and share their own background story and to hear from their peers. International students valued knowledge of Irish culture, whether this was through formal channels but also knowledge from dialogue and encounters with their peers. Consider ring-fencing time early in the trimester to allow students to introduce themselves to and learn about each other.

"Something like that is nice to help understand, and for students coming in, especially people coming from South Asia, because our culture's really different. Whatever we do is extremely different from whatever people do here... taking out people for dinner or buying drinks, just the smallest things are very different. With classes like that we understand a lot better about the country that we're studying in, and then it's just better overall and to know about other countries also."

[Participant 16, Student]

"If I have a module, and other people come in for it from somewhere else, if you sprinkle them around and get them to introduce themselves, that then changes the dynamic and improves the whole thing, and even my own students get better."

[Participant 1, Academic Staff]

"Prepare to know your group... Where are these people coming from? Anticipate how they give into different situations and then also demonstrate your openness… Create and facilitate an environment for other people to share, to come with their own experiences, and to be able to express themselves in the ways that make them feel comfortable."

[Participant 31, Academic Staff]

2. Group Work

Reflective Questions:
Are there opportunities for students to work in groups on your module/programme? What kind of group work would lend itself to your module and learning outcomes? Are groups diverse in terms of culture, citizenship, gender, age?

Group work is an important vehicle for Intercultural Learning and exchange. Whilst it is important the students are not overburdened with assessment tasks relating to work with different groups, students should be exposed to group work to facilitate development of important intercultural skills. Lecturers/module coordinators should allocate students to groups with attention to mixing gender, cultures, age, citizenship. Group work may involve completion of assessed assignments but may also take other low stakes forms such as: in-class conversations in small groups or pairs, group problem solving or case scenarios, using role play and storytelling. During group work, structure or engineer the exercise to promote intercultural exchange.

"Introduce a lot of group work. I think it might be a good idea to assign certain roles to each member within the group, to ensure that each member is sufficiently contributing to the group's tasks.

Because to a certain extent, with the group work, one can end up with a certain black box, where you just see the end product, but you don't see in terms of the contributions of each member. And, that can have a cultural dimension, in terms of people being left out, or left behind, or not being sufficiently encouraged."

[Participant 2, Academic Staff]

"The strategy for me is to make this experiential. To make it real so it's not just an abstract concept but we almost force our students or colleagues to be in the shoes of the other people, to practice empathy. How would it be to be in the shoes of a man, or a woman, a black person, a person with HIV, et cetera? That's what I do in my classes at the end."

[Participant 28, Academic Staff]

3. Internationalisation of the Curriculum

Reflective Questions:
Review your supporting material, reading lists, resources- do the writings relate to diverse contexts and cultures? Are the authors from diverse cultural contexts? Are examples that you use set in different cultures and contexts?

It is good, where possible and where relevant, that the curriculum reflects diverse contexts and not confined only to Irish or Western contexts. By doing so students are introduced to different perspectives, systems, and ways of doing. Ensure that reading lists and examples used are rooted in diverse contexts and perspectives.

"How are we looking at our curriculum and actually talking about that diversity and inclusion, if that's not really rooted in say broad subjects?…. How do you get that sort of different lens in there if everything is kind of stemming from a very Western way of thinking?"

[Participant 8, Student]

"The kind of curriculums all end up looking the same anyway, if you go to do an ...undergrad, wherever you are, it's going to be the same faces and writers. ... You know what everyone else knows but we're just repeating the same type of learning. That's very un-inclusive."

[Participant 8, Student]

4. Diversity of Contributors

Reflective Questions:
Is there diversity (gender, ethnicity, race, age, nationality, class) in who contributes to your module or programme? How could you introduce more diversity to the teaching team?

It is common to have multiple internal and external contributors to modules and programmes. Students value different 'voices' contributing to a programme to broaden their exposure to different experiences and perspectives. Consider inviting a range of contributors to your module. Contributors may be in a 'face to face' context where one is contributing to a session for a specific class or it may take the form of a podcast or e-lecture.

"If you take the travelling community as an example. If there were opportunities to talk to them and understand them... I think people learn better from those kinds of opportunities as opposed to just lectures about it and learning simply what their beliefs are, as opposed to how they feel about it, and how they feel about us and about our beliefs and whatever."

[Participant 18, Student]

"...the dynamics of the pedagogy could benefit from a more diverse perspective. And that's perhaps a little hidden within the diversity that we have within the classroom already."

[Participant 2, Academic Staff]

5. Space For Intercultural Learning

Reflective Questions:
Is there [safe] space on your module for conversations, discussions, encounters?

Intercultural learning takes time and ideally should be threaded through modules and programmes. Conversations, discussions, encounters and storytelling are considered simple but key vehicles for Intercultural Learning. Such interactions may and do occur within and outside the classroom, both as formal and informal learning. Consider creating space within the curriculum for informal interactions such as conversations, discussions, encounters and storytelling. These interactions may be part of the formal curriculum or informal, they may take place in physical or online learning environments.

"More opportunities for conversation in general, because even a conversation like this [Focus Group] we wouldn't really have an opportunity for through our course. Maybe through other things like VO [UCD Volunteers Overseas], which you learn a lot from. And it's not like somebody is talking at you as well. You get to figure out yourself how you actually think, because for some people these conversations might be their first experience to talk about different things."

[Participant 18, Student]

"Giving examples from their own experience, sharing it in a group, and then discussing how people would interpret it. Maybe examples of events or conversations that people thought that they didn't understand. Like communication was somehow not perfect and they thought that was due to some kind of intercultural misunderstanding. ..That was quite effective and the other people in the group were giving their interpretations, and we discussed case after case."

[Participant 31, Academic Staff]

6. Using Artefacts To Drive Intercultural Learning

Artefacts are everyday objects and examples may include photographs, items of clothing, social and multimedia imagery, a piece of sculpture or art or any form of writing. Artefacts may be used to help students articulate their experiences and understandings of Intercultural Learning.

Artefacts may be used as an icebreaker to initiate conversation and discussion but also a powerful tool to give the student control and freedom to speak to issues and experiences relevant to them. Use of artefacts also facilitates movement of power or control of discussion and learning to the student, (rather than the teacher).

"I brought a Nike jacket... A big part of what I would call my cultural identity is rooted in class, and it's maybe true that different experiences of education I've had, it's not usually encouraged to think of a working class identity as a cultural identity. But I think very much is, and has been suppressed or attempted institutionally to be suppressed at each level. Perhaps not actually in the masters, which was maybe the first time I think that it was actually at the fore of a lot of our learning. But I think going from a primary DEIS school where we had an elocution teacher, and we were told to soften our 'th'es. And also my parents at home. There was always a huge thing that it would be a shame for people to know first off, that you are working class and for that to be the first thing somebody grasps about you. Similarly when I went to another university. I'd a very small class. There was zero contact with class issues whatsoever. I then was so frustrated by this, I wrote my thesis about it, about this tension between feminist art practice and working class identity. I think for me Intercultural Learning is finding that tension between that identity that maybe is the reason you shouldn't be in institutional learning or that people have told you that this would be a barrier. Everyone bringing their Nike jackets, whatever they may be, whatever format, they are, that to me is Intercultural Learning. Everyone can just wear them in, it'd be very recognized, this is who I am, this is part of me. That is intercultural to me."

[Participant 20, Student]

7. Visibility of Intercultural Learning

Reflective Questions:
Is Intercultural Learning a goal of your teaching? Is it visible to students, articulated in learning outcomes, assessed?

Students value Intercultural Learning as a mechanism to ensure that as graduates they are equipped for the global workforce. Classroom diversity is not leveraged as much as it could be. There is a need to ensure that the goal of Intercultural Learning is 'visible' within the curriculum. The goal of Intercultural Learning should be embedded in programme philosophies and articulated in programme/module learning outcomes. Achievement of intercultural skills can be incorporated into and demonstrated via assessed work, for example reflective essays, log books, engagement with discussion boards.

"What does UCD stand for? What does UCD look at from another viewpoint? You are training the students to be the future workforce of the world. You're not just an island. Then what are the values that the future of the workforce should have?"

[Participant 5, Student]

"I don't think enough of the teaching staff have enough perception of where some people, who are Irish, may be coming from, whether it's a very rural background or a working-class background. And we just need to be more aware."

[Participant 30, Academic Staff]

Useful Links

1. Leask B, Carroll J (2013) Good Practice Principles in Practice: Teaching Across Cultures International Education Association of Australia. Available at: https://www.ieaa.org.au/ documents/item/125/ (Accessed: 24th March 2021)

2. Killick D (2005). Cross-Cultural Capability & Global Perspective Guidelines for Curriculum Review Leeds Metropolitan University. Available at: http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/ id/eprint/2808/ (Accessed: 24th March 2021)

3. Robson S, Almeida J (2018) ATIAH: Internationalisation at Home: Approaches and Tools Newcastle University. Available at: https://research.ncl.ac.uk/atiah/ (Accessed: 24th March 2021)

4. Deardorff D (2019) Manual for developing intercultural competencies Available at: https://www.taylorfrancis.com/ books/manual-developing-intercultural-competencies-darla-deardorff/10.4324/9780429244612 (Accessed: 24th March 2021)