

Chapter 40

Integrating Intercultural Competencies Into the Professional Skills Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural competence is increasingly seen by employers as a desirable graduate capability needed in today's diverse and intercultural workplace. This chapter reports on a curriculum intervention - a 20-hour online intercultural skills course - aimed at introducing a large number of undergraduate students enrolled in a co-operative education program to fundamental intercultural concepts and ideas. The chapter seeks to contribute to the literature on intercultural skill development by discussing the course model and its implementation, student perceptions of their level of intercultural competence prior to and after the course, and the challenges involved in the delivery of the course. The main purpose of the chapter is to discuss how courses and programs that aim to develop professional skills may offer a promising vehicle for fostering students' intercultural competence, particularly when these courses utilize online learning tools to enable greater access to intercultural learning.

INTRODUCTION

University graduates are increasingly expected to demonstrate dispositions and skills that would enable them to successfully navigate culturally-diverse professional and social contexts. Several recent reports focusing on professional's skills as they relate to employability have identified intercultural competence as a critical skill among job applicants (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2013, 2015; British Council, 2013; Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2016). For example, a study conducted with employers in nine countries identified intercultural competence, especially the ability

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-9279-2.ch040

to demonstrate respect for others and work effectively in diverse teams, as an important skillset for new university graduates (British Council, 2013). In the Canadian context, the need for interculturally-competent graduates was underscored in a recent report from the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE): “Ensuring that students have an internationalized qualification upon completing their studies is becoming more and more important to Canadian institutions” (CBIE, 2016, p. 73).

In response to the calls for developing interculturally-competent graduates, many universities in Canada and the US have included intercultural and international competencies in their strategic documents and institutional statements of learning outcomes. Some institutions have even made a public commitment to adopt an institution-wide strategy for developing intercultural competencies; the *University of Sydney 2016-20 Strategic Plan* not only identifies cultural competence as one of the six university-wide degree outcomes, but also outlines an ambitious curriculum framework that would see cultural competence embedded in *all* undergraduate degrees (p. 32).

Despite a growing emphasis on producing interculturally-competent graduates, there is a paucity of successful examples of institution-wide approaches to the development of intercultural competence among students of all academic disciplines and majors. As Chun and Evans (2016) observe, “most institutions have struggled to develop integrated and intentional approaches to addressing cultural competence in the curriculum and cocurriculum. The operationalization of cultural competence within the undergraduate experience remains an elusive and often neglected goal” (p. 7).

This chapter starts with the premise that intercultural competence is a transferable professional skill connected to employability, and therefore universities ought to provide students with meaningful opportunities to develop intercultural competence during their academic careers. The main goal of the chapter is to reflect on our experience of offering an online intercultural learning course to a large number of undergraduate students enrolled in the co-operative education program at a large Canadian university. By examining our experience with the delivery of the course in the context of the current literature on teaching intercultural skills, we argue that courses and programs that aim to develop professional skills may offer a promising vehicle for fostering students’ intercultural competence, particularly when these courses utilize online learning tools to enable greater access to intercultural learning.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, we briefly review the literature on the development of intercultural competence. Next, we describe the course model in the context of the online professional skills program designed for undergraduate students enrolled in co-operative education programs. We also discuss the results of a pre- and post-test used in the course in order to examine student perceptions of their levels of intercultural competence prior to and immediately after completing the course. In the remaining section, we discuss lessons learned while implementing the course over the last four years, and offer some considerations for instructors interested in developing similar courses at their institutions.

INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES TO INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT

Intercultural competence is a multifaceted concept that includes a cluster of various attitudes, habits, and ways of thinking and being. Although institutions of higher education use different terms related to intercultural competence (e.g. global awareness, global mindset, cross-cultural effectiveness) and deploy different meanings when referring to this construct, the growing body of intercultural research

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