

## **Bringing them together: international students and others**

Ricky Lowes

*International Centre, Plymouth University*

### **ABSTRACT**

As the 21st century progresses, the drive to internationalize UKHE is developing apace. This article looks at one aspect of internationalization – the integration of international students in a UK HEI - and describes some simple but effective initiatives we have taken at Plymouth University to bring international and Erasmus students into contact with home students and members of the local community to help facilitate successful integration.

---

### **Introduction**

For years educators have lamented the fact that many international students do not seem to be able to integrate into university social life and mix with home students, and so fail to make the most of their stay in the UK. Equally, home students fail to benefit from contact with other cultures, and the potential amazing diversity of cultural encounters and sharing of knowledge that could go on is largely lost. In this context the ‘internationalisation’ of our universities rings a little hollow. How to prevent this needless waste of opportunities, and promote and foster meaningful contact between home and international students is increasingly the focus of a number of initiatives at universities. Against a backdrop of reports of negative perceptions of international students by home students (e.g. Woods et al, 2011; Cathcart et al, 2006) and the lack of integration of the two groups experienced in the Plymouth Business School (McMahon, 2011; Williams & Mumford, 2012), those of us concerned about the situation decided we would wait no longer to address these problems, which were evidently not going to resolve themselves without intervention. We embarked upon a number of projects, where the common element was a wish to bring international students and locals -both home students and members of the local community - together and allow them to develop relationships. This article briefly describes some simple but really effective initiatives which we have seen transform the relationships between home and international students and which can be easily transferred to other contexts.

A major barrier to the integration of international students into friendship groups where English is used has been the weak level of communicative language skills of some of them. Improving their language skills is a necessary prerequisite to their learning about, understanding and forming meaningful connections with others. However, some seem reluctant or unable to make the necessary effort. Of course, the Catch 22 is that without sustained meaningful dialogue with others, language capacity will not improve. Communication is both a goal and a method of learning, and the experience of successful communication will motivate students to further develop their language skills. Learning from and with others also fosters learner autonomy (Lowes & Target, 1998, p.42), an essential skill in UK HE. With this in mind we have taken advantage of emerging opportunities to engineer

and design learning activities that involve students (home as well as international) communicating with native speakers of the languages they are learning, where possible their natural peers with whom friendships may develop.

### **Use of Peer Mentors**

There is evident potential for exploiting the fruitful differences that exist between students from different cultures for their mutual benefit. Lederer and Raban (in Boud et al 2001, p.137) stress the value of heterogeneity among the students, as does Kirchmeyer (in Gibbs 2010, p.4). This kind of knowledge exchange is a perfect hybrid of 'same level' and of 'cross-level' tutoring (Boud et al., 2001). Since each side of the dyad is simultaneously both 'expert' and 'novice', the learning aims are parallel and complementary which develops students' roles as valuable resources in reciprocal learning relationships. The more mutually beneficial the exchange, the greater its effectiveness, as it contributes to a feeling of pride in contributing to others' learning as well as satisfaction in one's own achievements.

Our peer learning initiative did not originally start with the English language needs of international students but began in 2010 in the Languages Department by bringing Spanish exchange students as mentors into Spanish classes. The focus was on providing one-to-one support in reviewing their Spanish CVs and developing the learners' speaking skills by practising a mock job interview. In a series of one-hour sessions, learners worked one to one or two to one with native Spanish speakers. In feedback, students were unanimously positive about the experience: *'it definitely was the best Spanish lesson I have had since starting Uni. Just loved the lesson.'* This appeared to be not only because of the intense language practice but also due to the interaction with young peers of a different background: there was excitement at bridging a divide. Some continued to co-tutor with mentors they had met in class: *'I met with a group of Spanish people yesterday ... we have arranged to meet up often.'* Continuation outside the classroom is an important goal in managing effective peer learning (Boud et al, 2011) and students were encouraged to engage in co-coaching, outside of classes. The mentors (mainly Erasmus students) also expressed a great deal of satisfaction and enjoyment: *'About naming 3 things that I took away of this experience I would say: meeting people who are learning your own language (which is pretty interesting), learning about other processes of teaching and having a lot of fun!'* The Spanish students reported that mentoring increased their contact with home students and allowed them to develop more friendships. The final performance of the learners in the oral assessment in both years was significantly better than predicted, which mirrors outcomes reported in Falchikov (2001).

Given such positive outcomes, the experience was repeated, this time using home-student mentors to support international students with their English in two sessions: preparing oral presentations and reviewing a practice written exam, and again the experience was evaluated very positively by both mentors and mentees.

### **....and the Use of Non-peer Mentors**

A few weeks later, an initiative was taken in the Summer School to bring in members of the University of the Third Age (U3A), an association of retired people interested in learning 'for

fun', to converse with postgraduate pre-sessional students on a one to one basis, over a cup of coffee, in a fairly informal one-off session entitled: '10 things you simply must do while you are in Plymouth'. This was received with such enthusiasm and worked so well that we invited the U3A members back to support pre-sessional undergraduates by listening to their oral presentations and giving them feedback. Both groups of students and the participating U3A members were extremely positive about the experience, and we teachers were gratified to see whole classes of students communicating fluently for extended periods with previously unknown interlocutors. From this initial pilot a number of other mentoring projects have developed in an on-going partnership with the U3A (discussed below).

Naturally, these sessions were carefully planned and co-ordinated by the lecturers, and much of their success was due to the sessions having a definite focus and clear learning goals. This said, once the initial planning was done, they ran remarkably smoothly, like moving a heavy load on water. They also created a qualitative change in the subsequent learning atmosphere, with formerly quiet students becoming more forthcoming and showing more initiative.

A parallel initiative in the Plymouth Business School, using Chinese students to mentor learners of Mandarin is described in a separate article in this issue. Again outcomes, in terms of learning and student satisfaction, were extremely positive.

### **The Languages Café**

The Café, a joint initiative of the School of Tourism and Hospitality and the English Language Centre which runs three times a week for one hour, is an experience of informal, co-curricular learning and networking between students, staff and members of the community. Students and others come together around a cup of coffee to practise the languages they are learning, forming temporary 'learning circles'. Originally conceived for foreign language practice, from 2008 there has also been an international table where English is the lingua franca.

Research indicates that there is an important link between place and behaviour (Jamieson et al, 2010), and we have witnessed how this informal learning space has fostered learner-centred, non-traditional learning opportunities. The Languages Cafe is an expression of the philosophy of learner-focussed teaching, where the learner is freed to engage in ways that best suit him or her (it is an entirely optional activity). This whole-person, playful, experiential learning (Rogers and Freiburg, 1994) is often the most successful kind, and much of the feedback from users has made this point.

The Cafe has worked very effectively to achieve the twin aims of language learning and developing intercultural student friendships and has elicited some of the most positive and effusive feedback of any project we have been involved with: '*amazing opportunity to improve the communication skills!*'; '*This is an amazing arrangement. People are helping each other and having fun.*' It is an opportunity for networking and partnerships. As Hixenbaugh (in Potter & Hampton 2009, p.5) states, 'relationships are at the heart of the issue of students' experience of university' and we have seen that our efforts to facilitate contact between groups of students who might otherwise not make connections are deeply appreciated.

The gains are many and varied, apart from the obvious benefits of students developing their speaking skills, they learn about other cultures and gain in general confidence. Students from different parts of the university get to meet each other and fruitful alliances are formed. First year undergraduates sit and chat with PhD students, and students from a range of nationalities and backgrounds break out of the silos of their home groups and socialise comfortably. Learners pair up to form tandem-learning partnerships. Some students - including international students - have taken on leading roles, becoming lead facilitators of language groups or even running sessions. ELT staff supported a Russian student to run evening sessions of the Languages Cafe independently. This year, the role has been taken up by a third year International Relations home student, who is running the sessions with enthusiasm and imagination, as part of her work for the Plymouth Award<sup>1</sup>. As this article is published, and she embarks on her Finals, a first year Business student is taking over her role.

### **New initiatives 2012-13 and thoughts for the future**

We are constantly seeking new ways to bring students together. We are fortunate to have in our faculty a centre which offers a rich co-curricular dip-in programme and so this year we added workshops on Intercultural Communication to the offer, running a series of four workshops that aim to bring home and international students together to increase mutual understanding and develop intercultural capacity. Their popularity with home students (who make up 50-60% of attendees) indicates that a significant number have a real interest in learning about other cultures. The workshops give international students the opportunity to communicate in a structured but less formal setting than the classroom, where their expertise puts them on a more even footing with home students, and they feel more confident about communicating.

Finally, one of our most exciting initiatives this year, already mentioned above, is a strategic partnership with the University of the Third Age (U3A). This enterprising group has centres all over the UK and its members in Plymouth benefit from a partnership with the university whereby they may attend university events and lectures. A number of their members now volunteer as mentors for our (mainly Chinese) international students either for group activities or for one-to-one support. Our Chinese students seem to enjoy working with older people, perhaps reflecting the traditional idea of Chinese reverence for age, and so this is a particularly effective partnership. The activities are perceived very positively by the students (one student rushed up to the author in the middle of an activity and exclaimed: 'This is wonderful! I am so happy!') and by the U3A members who have described working with our young international students as 'joint activities for genuine mutual benefit' which they find 'rewarding', 'very useful' and 'very interesting' and which make them feel valued. We are gathering feedback during this first year of the partnership that will give us a clear direction of how to proceed in the future but there is no doubt that we will continue this very valuable partnership.

The positive experiences with using mentors have motivated us to seek more opportunities to use them and to reflect on how they can be supported most effectively. Mentor input is now a regular feature of Spanish classes. In the English Language Centre we also use mentors on a regular basis; apart from their use in lessons, we run a weekly English Club, led by a lecturer

and facilitated by five or six student mentors. We are developing strategies and support mechanisms to ensure that the mentoring system we use is effective and sustainable.

The Languages Café this year has welcomed an increasingly diverse range of participants (including local school pupils and teachers) and now has a committee made up mainly of student members, who are designing ways to engage more students, particularly those less likely to attend.

All these schemes require a certain amount of planning, a good deal of hard work to ensure the logistics are right, and much enthusiasm from all involved, but the benefits, both short- and long-term are clear to us and make the enterprise worthwhile. We plan to carry out research into the projects to investigate in more depth and with rigour what the benefits are for all stakeholders, and make these more explicit. We would be very interested in making contact with others who have embarked on similar schemes, and are happy to share ideas with those who are planning to.

For more on the Languages Café, please see <http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/pages/view.asp?page=38801>.

For information on the University of the Third Age, see <http://www.u3a.org.uk/>

For information on the Plymouth Award, see <http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/pages/view.asp?page=32288>

#### CONTACT THE AUTHOR

[ricky.lowes@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:ricky.lowes@plymouth.ac.uk)

#### References

- Boud, D., Cohen, R. and Sampson, J., 2001. *Peer learning in higher education: learning from and with each other*. London: Kogan Page.
- Cathcart, A. Dixon-Dawson, and J. Hall, R., 2006. 'Reluctant hosts and disappointed guests? Examining expectations and enhancing experiences of cross cultural group work on postgraduate business programmes.' *International Journal of Management Education*, 5(1) pp.13-22.
- Falchikov, N., 2001. *Learning together: peer tutoring in higher education*. Abingdon: Routledge Falmer.
- Gibbs, G., 2010. *Assessment of group work: lessons from the literature*. ASKe, <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/Groupwork%20Assessment/> [Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> December 2012].
- Jamieson, P., Fisher, K., Gilding, T., Taylor, T. and Trevitt, C., 2010. "Place and space in the design of New Learning Environments." *Higher Education Research and Development*, 19(2), pp.221-236.

- Lowes, R. and Target, F., 1998. *Helping Your Students to Learn: A Guide to Developing Student Autonomy* London: Richmond Publishing.
- McMahon, P., 2011. "Chinese voices: Chinese learners and their experiences of living and studying in the United Kingdom." *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 33(4), pp.401-414.
- Potter, J., and Hampton, D. (Eds.), 2009. *Students supporting students*. SEDA Special 26. London: Staff and Educational Development Association.
- Rogers, C. and Freiburg, J., 1994. *Freedom to Learn for the Nineties*. Prentice Hall.
- Williams, J. and Mumford, J., 2012. *Understanding Students' NSS Evaluations of BABA, BABS and BSc Business Management* TandSS (Tactical and Strategic Studies) March 2012.
- Woods, P.R., Barker, M.C. and Hibbins, R., 2011. 'Tapping the benefits of multicultural group-work: An exploratory study of postgraduate management students.' *International Journal of Management Education*, 9(2), pp.59-70.