

Language learning and cultural integration over a cup of coffee

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to share the experience of an international (EU) student and a home student who are working on a project called the Languages Café at Plymouth University. The article will introduce the project and outline the benefits that it brings to international and home students.

The experience of an international student (Jekaterina Kockina, Latvia)

Like the management of institutions, many students are aware of the issues that internationalisation brings into higher education, particularly because students actually experience them. Despite the fact that universities are actively trying to meet the needs of the increasingly diverse student body, more projects are needed to facilitate international student integration into university life.

For both international and home students, integration into a university can represent a challenge. This involves making new friends and worrying about how things work in this unknown environment. For an international student, additionally, it can be difficult to understand a new country's culture and rules, such as the way of socialising. Many students, including myself, are looking for a safe environment and friendly atmosphere to meet other students, who will co-create their student experience at a university. This is the reason why I feel extremely enthusiastic about the Languages Café project (<http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/pages/view.asp?page=38801>).

The Languages Café is an event or activity where university students and staff get together in order to speak different languages. The purpose of the Languages Café is to provide people with an opportunity to practise their target languages with native speakers and with each other in an informal and friendly setting that facilitates inclusion and integration. Moreover, the Languages Café attendees benefit from socialising and networking in an alcohol-free environment which aids cultural inclusion and promotes a healthy lifestyle.

The idea of the Languages Café originated in the Languages Department in the Plymouth Business School and is currently funded by the School of Tourism and Hospitality. Initially it was held during early afternoon in one of the campus cafés. The purpose of the activity was to encourage home and international students to get together and help each other with language learning. The languages spoken were French, Spanish, German and English. In October 2011 an idea emerged to set up the Languages Café in the evenings as a session for those who are not able to attend in the afternoon session or for those who are interested in

more practice.

Through the collaboration with the Cultural Café (which opened in 2011 on Plymouth University campus and has been hosting various events to celebrate cultural diversity) four pilot Languages Café sessions were organised in November 2011. The Languages Café encouraged practising additional languages: Chinese Mandarin and British Sign Language. This was appreciated by the Chinese community as well as by staff from Disability Assist who are learning the language to provide better support for the students.

In my opinion, the most significant advantage is that this activity is mainly student-led: students are networking and setting up different language groups, as they think appropriate. Moreover, students who support the project and want to get involved can suggest and implement ideas to re-shape the project to meet changing student needs.

I was introduced to the Languages Café when I was in my first year, and it has been valuable to me since the first session I attended. When I started learning Spanish, as a part of my degree, I started going to the café to practise my Spanish. The informal and welcoming atmosphere enabled me to feel comfortable to practise, even though my language knowledge was very basic, and as a result I improved very quickly. This made me feel like I made an achievement very early in my university career and motivated me to work hard to achieve better results in language learning as well as academic and extra-curricular activities.

When the idea of setting up the project in the Cultural Café emerged, my tutor, who also oversees and co-ordinates the project, offered me the opportunity to undertake various responsibilities when setting up language sessions. I actively participated in the promotion of the project, while liaising with the Cultural Café and coordinating language mentors, who were recruited for the pilot. I was also hosting the evenings as well as undertaking a language mentor role at the English and Spanish tables. In this way, I have acquired communication skills, team working skills, organisation skills, management and presentation skills as well as language skills. Moreover, I learned to communicate at different levels when I worked with language mentors and the café committee. The most valuable aspect for me is the cultural awareness I gained when working closely with people from different countries. I consider this to be the most valuable asset to have in the globalised world we live in.

My participation in the Languages Café has both positively affected my own student experience and helped me to improve the experience of others. Participation in the project not only provided me with a safe and entertaining environment where I easily integrated, but also gave me an incredible development opportunity. I feel that the project contributed to my personal and professional development. It was an important experience for me as I contributed to celebration of cultural diversity, and I feel I helped many students to make new friends. The fact that I participated in setting up the project made me feel more attached to the university, as my effort was highly valued by the participants of the sessions as well as by my leaders. Also, as an International Business student, I think I was able to apply and improve the knowledge I gained from my course. This gives me confidence to believe that similar projects, including the Languages Café, should receive additional support and promotion as they facilitate better integration and inclusion, and most importantly, awareness of internationalisation issues in higher education. Thanks to the project I got acquainted with like-minded people who are equally interested in cultural diversity, and we now promote it together.

The experience of a home student (Demi Blake)

Growing up on the outskirts of Birmingham, and coming from a dual heritage background, I was conditioned to interacting with other cultures on a daily basis. Although I am very aware that unlike some of my university peers, I grew up in a very multicultural area, I still arrived at university with the assumption that most people knew at least one person of a different nationality and culture to them. I quickly learnt that this was not the case. Luckily, Plymouth is brimming with cultural diversity. The university attracts students from all over the world, giving myself and my peers the chance to meet new people and learn about new cultures we'd never before encountered. But moving to a new country can be difficult. Moving to one where you have no contacts and no friends is harder, which is why when the opportunity to help out with the Languages Café arose, I was eager to get involved. Lacking another language myself, I felt it would be an excellent opportunity to improve upon any basic language skills I had, as well as meet students with vibrant and diverse backgrounds - after all, culture is beautiful.

I became the head mentor and organiser of the Languages Café evening sessions; the hour-long weekly sessions were informal, based on the peer to peer mentoring sessions that were held in a cafe on campus. Here, students come in for a coffee and a chat: for those wanting to improve their English, I will ask them a mixture of simple and complex questions in an informal manner, just as a friend would. The sessions originally started with around eighteen students; the majority of whom were trying to improve their English, but word quickly spread, and progressively the sessions grew larger. After setting up a partnership with a local language school we even started to attract members of the public; it was not unusual to find that new attendees had only just arrived in Plymouth, or were even only visiting the city for a holiday.

Today, the sessions attract around 40 students and locals. The majority of students are from Western Europe, whilst the rest of our numbers are made up of students from China and Eastern Europe. Everyone has shown great improvement in their English proficiency. We also have a few British students who come to improve their Spanish and Mandarin and everyone gets a chance to learn something new. But you cannot bring a bunch of people together without friendships forming, and it really has been a pleasure getting to know everyone and learn about their lives back home. We have begun to organise social events outside of the sessions, and as a group we enjoy going out for meals, trips to the cinema and on nights out.

Admittedly, running the Languages Café has had its difficulties. As a Third Year International Relations student with two part-time jobs and being a chair of a university society, trying to fit in the sessions has taken its toll on managing my workload. I often run to the sessions straight from university and work with little time to gather my thoughts; having to answer grammar questions from some forty students (all with vastly differing levels of English proficiency) after being on campus non-stop from 8.30am can leave me, to be honest, a little flustered. Also, with such a short time frame for such a big session, I often work for an

hour extra just to ensure everyone gets the attention they deserve and expect. Similarly, the extra planning for my sessions and events has cut into the time I should be spending on my dissertation and other university commitments. However, thanks to the Languages Café I have drastically improved my levels of organisational and communication skills as well as my patience! Likewise, it has given me so much experience in teaching English and mentoring - in the near future I hope to undertake a TEFL qualification and teach English in Vietnam. The Languages Café has given me a brilliant platform to go from.

To conclude, the aim of the Languages Café is to continue to bring together people of all languages, cultures and nationalities. In undertaking this project I have learnt so much about myself and other cultures, and hopefully the session can expand to two hour sessions twice weekly. This way, everyone can get much more out of us and out of each other. It also means we will all get to see each other more often! The Languages Café is an opportunity to learn more than language: it's a place of self discovery.

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