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## CHALLENGING THE PERCEPTION: TURNING THE IDEAL INTO REALITY

*The ideal of transforming a culturally diverse student population into a valued resource for activating processes of international connectivity, social cohesion and intercultural learning is still very much that, an ideal.' (De Vita, 2005: 75).*

**ABSTRACT.** Most initiatives in many UK universities designed to integrate their home and international student cohorts are likely to take place either within academic courses or through extra-curricular activities. Unusually, for 8 years between the academic years 2007/8 and 2014/15, the University of Birmingham in the UK ran an elective module within its Personal Skills Award (PSA) that combined academic assessed learning in a social setting. This module sought to facilitate intercultural communication using the potential of its culturally diverse student population as a resource for intercultural learning in order to realise De Vita's (2005) 'ideal'. The participants, home and international undergraduates, developed their intercultural awareness over a period of several weeks by being each other's cultural informants in social meetings outside the classroom, acting in effect as case studies. To pass the module and achieve 10 credits (which were included on their degree transcript) the participants had to submit a reflective learning journal and attend a short interview about what they had learnt.

Data obtained from responses to a questionnaire sent to course participants concludes that they benefitted from, and valued, not only the autonomous dual learner-teacher approach but also the informal nature of the learning situation.

**KEYWORDS:** intercultural communication, personal skills, reciprocal learning.

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper will first refer to some of the theories concerning intercultural communication which, alongside the increase in international students since the turn of the century, has become an increasingly important topic in higher education in the UK. This will be followed by a description of the elective module in Intercultural Communication and Cross-Cultural Awareness (ICCA) and some of the findings obtained from research undertaken in 2014.

Essentially, intercultural communication concerns *'how people understand each other across group boundaries of various sorts: national, geographical, ethnic, occupational, class or gender'* (Kramsch, 2001, p. 201). Its counterpart, intercultural learning, has been defined as:

*'[an] increased awareness of subjective cultural context (world view), including one's own, and develop[ment of the] ability to interact sensitively and competently across cultural contexts as both an immediate and long-term effect of exchange'* (Bennett, 2009, p. 2).

There is a view that in order to be successful, intercultural communication requires the acquisition of factual information about the customs and behaviours ascribed to a particular nationality. For example, Hall and Hall consider that this success is predicated on understanding *'the basic patterns that characterize the Germans, the French and the Americans'* (1990, p. xiv). However, there also appears to be a presupposition that intercultural communication can be difficult, as it will inevitably involve problematic encounters (Watanabe, 1993) and misunderstanding and miscommunication (Alim, 2005). Additionally, the connotations of commonly used expressions like *'culture bumps'* (see, for example, Jiang, 2000) and the *'culture iceberg'* (Hooker, 2009) suggest that it is fraught with dangers for the unwary. Bowers (1992) has even issued an apparently defeatist challenge:

*'Given the complexity of culture, is intercultural communication a feasible objective? ... Is it possible to transmit culture, which is all about group values, in a way, which is not itself value-laden and perhaps a distortion or diminution of the culture of the learner? ... where are our sources? For there are no dictionaries or reference grammars of culture'* (p. 36-37).

However earlier, more positively, Daun (2005) offered the solution that *'problematic intercultural communication is remedied by*

knowledge'. Tseng (2002) questions this traditional view that differences and tension are implicit in culture, and Phipps (2007, p. 6) claims encouragingly that mastering the 'myriad problems of intercultural communication will provide 'basic skills, economic profit and personal pleasure'. The empirically derived factors of intercultural competence discussed by Spitzberg (1989) include the ability to communicate interpersonally, adjust to different cultures, and establish personal relationships. Although 'exposure to cultural differences is broadening and ... a legitimate aspect of education in the modern world' (Bennett, 2009, p. 1), it has generally been recognised that this 'transformative potential' is not being realised on university campuses (Brown, 2009, p. 192; Leask, 2009, p. 206) not least because of the apparent preference of home and international students to stay in their own cultural groups (see for example, Harrison and Peacock, 2010).

To counter this preference, typical initiatives on university campuses intended to integrate international students socially into the host culture may involve student union activities (Allhouse, 2013), specially arranged social gatherings (Spencer-Oatey et al, 2014), or staff-led workshops or lunchtime discussions on particular relevant topics (Chen, 2013). However the eagerness of international students to participate in any of these is not always reciprocated by UK home students who are often perceived as being unwelcoming, unwilling to socialise and even 'weird and cold' (Brown, 2009, p. 445); see also, Reed et al, 1978, p. 6; Westwood and Barker, 1990; John, 2014, p. 20. The reasons given for this 'minimal interaction' (Kimmel and Volet, 2012, p. 2) include culturally motivated reticence (De Vita, 2000, p. 169), negative stereotyping of 'the other', a perception of lower academic ability, and lack of time (Leask and Carroll, 2011, p. 37).

Although Montgomery (2009) has reported that some integrated group projects within academic courses have resulted in international students being seen as knowledgeable and able to provide a different perspective, the integration of home and international students in academic departments seems to be equally problematic where it has been noted that 'cross-cultural work is time-consuming, 'psychologically intense' and has several risk factors associated with it, including risk of embarrassment and failure' (Paige, 2003, cited in Leask and Carroll, 2011, p. 650). Other barriers identified are again lack of time, disinterest and the preference of home students to stay in their co-national group (Ippolito, 2007).

It was an awareness of this situation that led to an elective credit-bearing module in ICCA being set up within the University of Birmingham's employability initiative. The PSA is an accredited award that enables undergraduate students to develop work-related personal and professional skills alongside their academic studies in preparation for graduate recruitment. There are now multiple ways that students can achieve this award but at the time of the research in 2014 students had to complete three 10-credit bearing modules over a period of two years. Since 'the modules can be used by academic colleagues as part of their formal academic programmes, the PSA is thought to be the first Student Award to sit in both the intra-curricular and extra-curricular areas of any university' (Jeffries, personal communication, 2010; for further information about the development of the PSA see Jeffries-Watts, 2014).

The members of staff who devised the ICCA module had several objectives. Firstly, in relation to the issues mentioned earlier, to transform the 'cultural baggage' (De Vita, 2000, p. 175) of international students into something positive, that is their 'cultural capital' (Turner, 2009, p. 244) so that as a result they would become 'cultural ambassadors and a source of that perspective' (Leask, 2009, p. 208). Secondly, to introduce each participating student to the idea of flexibility in how they saw and presented their own and another culture, and to think about what elements might be interesting to themselves and others. Thirdly, to enable the home students taking part to move away from an ethnocentric view (Ellis, 2006) and see themselves as an outsider and thus to understand the pros and cons of seeing the world in a different way (Littlemore, personal communication, nd). This is because 'due to their different perspectives and experiences, outsiders or 'others' often see things that insiders embedded within a culture view as normative and universal' (Ryan and Louie, 2007, p. 41).

Accordingly, the ICCA module was developed as a strategy to integrate international and home students (see, for example, Caruana and Spurling, 2007) but broadened this aspiration of a friendship scheme to include a formal requirement that those taking part should also be asked to report on what they had learnt about each other's culture. This objective - and basic structure - of the module when it was first set up was formalised in the official Module Description (2007) which stated that:

'Two students from different cultures will meet on a weekly basis for one term. At each meeting they will be invited to discuss the similar-

ities and differences between their cultures and examine subjects such as culture shock. They will also be asked to organise an activity that will introduce the other student to an aspect of their own culture.'

The ICCA module ran annually between the academic years 2007/2008 and 2013/2014 with an average of 20 students registering every year. It would begin with two compulsory classroom based sessions which incorporated ice-breaking activities on culture-related topics, and an overview of culture and intercultural communication. Participants were also asked to consider the following definition...

'Culture is a way of life. Culture is the context within which we exist, think, feel and relate to others. It is the "glue" that binds a group of people together.' (Brown, 1993, p. 163)

... as it effectively conveyed the behavioural, affective and collective nature of the various cultures each of them may belong to, like their family, academic department, and friendship groups as well as their nationality or ethnic background. Additionally, with a view to developing work-related skills, those likely to prove useful such as teamwork, time management, and communication, listening and organisational skills were emphasised.

At the end of the second classroom session, each student was told which mixed cultural group they had been assigned to. These were created by simply using the very brief information which they had been asked to provide about their academic course and cultural background. For example, 'I am a British second year law student and live in Manchester' or 'I come from Brazil and study Economics'. Ideally, given the module descriptor, each group would have comprised just one 'home' and one 'international' student, which on the face of it would have been sufficient for the purposes of cultural exchange. However, the numbers enrolling sometimes precluded this straight, and apparently simplistic split. So where necessary, groups of three were created by making use of the students' 'blurred and intermingled' cultural boundaries (Guest, 2002, p. 155; see also, Barrett et al, 2013); for example, this meant that one international student might have been grouped with two home students with different heritage and/or from different parts of the UK. In addition, the expectation that a sharp contrast in the culture of each home/international pairing was critical in order for there to be something to learn from the other person was managed by

encouraging them to question what they thought they knew and think more deeply about each others' cultures. One example of this preconception concerns a student who had been paired with someone from a country she visited frequently and whose culture she thought she was already very familiar with. However, her feedback at the end of the module demonstrated her surprise to find out how much more there was to learn given the chance to have in-depth discussions with a national of that country.

Once formed, each group was responsible for conducting their own teaching/learning by arranging to meet each other over the subsequent five months (with a deadline of the end of the Spring term in March) for a recommended total of approximately 12 hours, or as long as proved necessary to exchange and obtain sufficient information in order to complete the assessed work and pass the module. This assessment was in two parts. It comprised the submission of a 2,000-word learning journal which had to combine a factual account of the meetings with reflection on how the student viewed the learning process. This was then followed a few days later by a 30 minute interview with the module co-ordinator using the following pre-set questions so that the students could prepare their answers in advance:

- What have you learnt about your partner's culture?
- How does s/he view your culture?
- How does s/he view their own culture?
- How do you now view your own culture?

In this way the students reported in writing and orally on their development of a multiperspective view of culture (Barrett et al, 2013) and the emic/etic (or insider/outsider) flexibility (Gudykunst et al. 1996, p. 6) envisaged when the module was set up.

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## THE RESEARCH

As has been described, in order to complete the module the members of each small group were required to exchange information and form views about their respective cultures during meetings that took place at times of their own choosing. However, Ellsworth (1992) cited by Ippolito (2007, p. 26) states that students may 'resent being given the pedagogical responsibility for educating others about their ethnic or cultural background (see also De Vita,

2001). Furthermore, Kimmel and Volet (2012, p. 158) claim that ‘clearly, student-led group activities conducted with peers from culturally diverse backgrounds appear challenging...because such activities require a sophisticated set of skills’. For this reason, research was undertaken in 2014 to investigate first, how the module participants viewed the process of learning about culture through being each other’s case studies and whether it was as challenging as has been suggested; and secondly, how the module’s structure, i.e. the requirement to submit assessed work within a given period of time supported this learning process. This paper focuses on the first part, that is, how the students viewed their combined roles of teacher and learner, but includes some of the relevant views expressed in the questionnaire in relation to the module structure.

It was considered that the most feasible, suitable and ethical research strategy (Denscombe, 2010) was to elicit specific information by sending a questionnaire to those students who took the module in 2012/13 and 2013/2014 as ‘it is only the actual participants themselves who can reveal the meanings and interpretations of their experiences and actions’ (Dornyei, 2011, p. 38). Five home students and six international students responded, as detailed in Table 1.

STUDENT	CULTURAL BACKGROUND	CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF GROUP MEMBER(S)
HOME STUDENTS (HOME)		
Home:H	UK	Japan
Home:L	UK	Romania (Int:G)
Home:C	UK	Hong Kong (Int:E)
Home:B	UK	Brazil
Home:S	UK: Hindu and Sikh heritage	China UK
International Students (Int)		
Int:R	Latvia	UK
Int:G	Romania	UK (Home:L)
Int:E	Hong Kong	UK (Home:C)
Int:C	Italy	UK
Int:Y	China	UK
Int:S	Kenya, Angola, Indonesia, UAE	UK Singapore

TABLE 1: TABLE 1: CULTURAL BACKGROUND AND GROUP MEMBERSHIP OF RESPONDENTS

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## THE FINDINGS

The questionnaire started by asking the students to rate various reasons why they chose to sign up for this particular module in order to ascertain what their expectations may have been beforehand. These were measured using a 5 point Likert scale (McDonough and McDonough, 1997) with the end points being High/Strongly Agree and Low/Strongly Disagree.

In brief, all the respondents agreed that they wanted to learn about another culture. However, although most wanted to tell someone about their own culture, and expected to learn about another culture, they did not all expect to meet someone from another culture or realise they would be the information source. This rather confused picture implies that they thought the sessions would be teacher- rather than student-led, either because they were used to classroom based learning or had misunderstood or not read the publicity regarding the module.

The next section of the questionnaire collected qualitative data about what is in effect tandem learning. Although this term is commonly used in reference to language exchange, it can also include cultural exchange, see for example, Dlaska (2000) and Kockina and Blake (2013), where a key element of this exchange is the autonomous nature of the learning situation whereby the students take 'significant responsibility for their own learning' (Boud, 1988, p. 23).

Before being asked about the learning *process*, the students were asked about the advantages and then the disadvantages of the learning *situation*, that is, what they thought about conducting their own learning outside the classroom environment. All 11 reported that they supported the idea of being able to conduct their own learning in this way. One of the advantages that they cited related to the informality this made possible. They also gave examples of the various freedoms it offered which mainly relate to the autonomy it gave them. These freedoms include being able to choose what topics they could explore, and the length of time they could spend asking and answering questions; and also having the ability to choose where they could meet each other, mentioning places like local markets, museums, pubs and restaurants. In addition, the choice of location seems to have enhanced their cultural learning experience, for example, observing different social behav-



iours, visiting their respective places of worship, learning more about local history, or even discovering the food each preferred in a restaurant, thus realising the dual educational and social purpose of the module. It could be claimed that meeting in places with leisure connotations is conducive not only to developing the friendships that the module instigators envisaged but also promotes informal, friendly, and thus open, exchanges. To support this claim several respondents referred to the freedom that not being in a supervised classroom gave them to hold intimate, frank and in-depth conversations.

Typical comments about this informality and flexibility included:

Less structured ... thus we're more comfortable and allows for free-flowing discussion. We are able to learn about each others' cultures in different environments which is nice and provides another insight into their culture (going to their house etc). Home:L

[It's] more personal and there's more freedom to talk your own way, it doesn't feel like an academic Q&A session....Plus you can go to various places (pub, museum) and the cultural exchange is more interactive this way. Int:G

It's more personal, casual and relaxed, hence we are able to open up and be more honest about our culture. Int:S

Much more informal so can learn about each other through mannerisms and conversations of our choosing rather than set tasks which can put people on edge and cause people to say things they think they should say rather than what they really think. Home:H

These comments support views expressed in the learning journals of two international students who took the module in 2009:

What I most appreciated about the course was the less formal standard of teaching which offered us the possibility to interact casually, in a non-restrictive environment. It was a pleasure for me to be able to talk freely based on my background and experiences and to be introduced through a casual and interactive way to other cultures.

Normally, the activities that I have taken part are organized prior to everything getting started...and students generally play their part as participants solely - showing up for the meeting according to timetable, discussing issues which are brought up by the instructor, and lastly overall conclusion will be made by instructor. Thus, this is a new and interesting experience.

The next section asked the students to identify the disadvantages of learning about culture in a small group outside a classroom. Curiously, their responses again highlighted the informal aspect but this time because they perceived it could be a potential difficulty for other people rather than one they had experienced. For instance, Home:B said that ‘the lack of structured learning may not suit everybody’, and Home:G thought that if discussions were too informal they could ‘overlook some of the more fundamental aspects of culture’. Lastly, while Home:H suggested that ‘a very good personal relationship could interfere with the learning process’ Int:C thought that ‘lack of confidence arising from not knowing the other person well might inhibit the ability to have frank discussions’.

Students were then asked about the learning *process* in terms of how they viewed their dual roles, first as informant/teacher and then as learner/researcher. The first question about how they regarded being a cultural informant elicited the strongest reaction and the longest answers of the questionnaire with frequent use of the epithets ‘challenging’ and ‘difficult’, indicating it took them out of their comfort zone. First, they had to provide information about something they were expected by their group member(s) to know a considerable amount about but were surprised to realise they did not and second, they did not find it easy to explain aspects of their lives that they had always taken for granted. For example:

It was unusual because it is not something that you naturally talk about and/or even think about. I was made more aware of how little I knew about my own culture. In addition ..., I found it difficult as well to talk about and share my culture. Int:S

It was fairly difficult at first as some things I feel I didn’t know about my own culture, as in people usually ignore things that are on their doorstep and I didn’t know a mass amount about our history. Home:L

From the questions I was asked, it was interesting to deduce what the person from the other country thought was stereotypically British behaviour. It was even more interesting to realise that some of it was true (i.e. queuing!) and things we take for granted may be completely crazy to someone else. Home:H

However, rather than view these difficulties negatively, it is clear that, as intended, having to describe their own culture created an interesting and enjoyable challenge that developed their multiperspectivity. Home:C reported that she ‘enjoyed talking about my cul-

ture and I think it made me realise things about my own culture which I initially had taken for granted’, and Home:B that it was ‘interesting as I had to make sure the information was correct and sometimes challenging. Made it much easier to realise how another person views my culture.’ While Home:L stated ‘many of the things people believe to be English stereotypes I didn’t realise were interesting things/stood out to other people from different cultures’.

Another positive aspect of the transactional nature of the module is seen in the comment that it was ‘easy to compare cultures as the other person was also interested in learning about my culture.’ This feeling of being valued is also reflected in Int:Y’s comment that ‘It’s very pleasant to teach others my culture’ and Int:C’s comment that ...

A lot of people since the beginning of first term here in Birmingham have asked me about my culture. But holding meetings to discuss my own culture is both flattering and interesting; I was very curious to know what other people thought about my culture and traditions.

In the next section of the questionnaire, the respondents were also enthusiastic about the reversed experience of being a learner and having a cultural informant, using descriptors like ‘fresh and eye-opening’ ‘insightful’, ‘interesting, fun and... surprising’. Comments included:

Intriguing. It changes your overall perception of that culture and it alters the stereotypes you initially had. ... Long story short, it lends perspective. Home:G

It was good to get a personal point of view because it helped break the stereotypes people often have about certain cultures and provides a more personal and unique perspective. In addition through doing so it helped clarify a lot of cultural norms and practices that are often misunderstood. Int:S

Even though each English individual will have a different account of traditions and cultural aspects, hearing their story from them feels more real and genuine. Int:C

Thus the responses given in the questionnaire would seem to contradict the daunting claim alluded to earlier that teaching intercultural communication ‘demands the most sophisticated coaching interventions’ (Bennett, 2009, p. 9), or requires ‘particular knowledge and skills because it is fraught, difficult and time consuming with the stakes high, the interactions intense and the pro-

cesses risky' (Leask, 2009, p. 210). The reason for this may partly be because the module is predicated on a transactional learning structure whereby each student is simultaneously both 'expert' and 'novice', questioner and respondent, researcher and resource. In addition, each student had parallel and complementary learning aims and could develop 'their respective roles as valuable resources in reciprocal learning relationships [which] contribute[s] to a feeling of pride in contributing to others' learning as well as satisfaction in one's own achievements' (Lowes, 2013, p. 11).

The final part of the questionnaire focused on motivation in terms of the influence of different aspects of the module structure (the requirement to obtain enough information in order to produce assessed work by a deadline) on how the meetings were organised and conducted (see, for example, Ryan and Deci, 2000). The findings were inconclusive; some students agreed that they were extrinsically motivated by the need to complete the module, while others were intrinsically motivated by the strong personal relationship which developed and the autonomous nature of the learning situation. For example, not all the students agreed that the need to produce assessed work was the only reason that their group continued to meet up, although this was not the case for the group comprising Int:G and Home L (see Table 1). Int:G agreed that the only reason he and Home:L met up was because they had to produce assessed work while Home:L disagreed that this was the case. While the partnered students Home:C and Int:E agreed that having a deadline ensured that they found time to keep meeting, Home:S commented that 'we met up because it was fun and interesting. [Completion of the] PSA Award was not of much importance at the time'; and Int:C stated that:

Throughout the module, our group became friends and started to meet up for different occasions that did not involve the need to produce assessed work. Some of these meetings were an occasion to share cultural traditions, such as tea and cupcakes, or just for a night out.

It should be noted in passing that the last two comments provide further evidence that the autonomy regarding when and where to meet seems to have enhanced both the learning process and social integration. And while eight students agreed that the need to produce assessed work (learning journal; final interview) influenced the way that their group organised the structure of their meetings, Int:C said that:

Our group decided to base our meetings on a natural conversation flow, rather than a planned set of topics that we would cover in the final essay. This created a more genuine “story” of one’s culture where one would add ideas as the conversation went along.

Home:C reported that ‘We structured our meetings depending on what we wanted to discuss and learn about from each other’; and that her group ‘went into depth in [a] few topics and covered different subtopics in order to have a more deeply analysed piece of work’ while Home:S commented that she had difficulty selecting what topics to write about in her journal because so many had been discussed.’

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**CONCLUSION** It had been clear from the content of their learning journals and answers given during their final interviews that the participants viewed the ICCA module positively. However, it was felt that more specific information was needed in order to analyse how it apparently achieved its purpose of developing their intercultural communication skills and multiperspectivity. Thus the research described in this paper was undertaken to learn more about how they viewed various aspects of the module, including the individual requirement to be both cultural informant and investigator.

The findings firstly indicate that the development of intercultural communication and learning carried out in this way can be challenging but does not have to be problematic. One of the main challenges reported was being asked to explain aspects of their own culture. However, this was described as being stimulating rather than troublesome. Thus the four-way framework of having to report on how their respective cultures were viewed by each group member appears to support Briguglio’s claim that ‘it is the *process* (my italics) of leading students to question, probe, discuss and analyse... cultural issues ... that is likely to be beneficial and effective’ (2006, p. 8). It would also appear that this framework had a greater influence on the learning/teaching process than the need to gather enough material in order to complete a learning journal and be able to answer questions in the final interview.

Secondly, the findings suggest that having the autonomy to be able to learn from and about each other in an informal situation gave the students a sense of ownership and self-direction. This also allowed them to explore those aspects of culture that were of particular personal interest or relevance in their own time and in their

own way. In addition, it meant that they could hold more profound conversations than may have been possible when chatting casually at an organised social event or in a classroom. In this way, they discovered that culture cannot be reduced to a 'few convenient essences' (Guest, 2002, p. 155) and that 'individuals have separate and unique cultures [and] and a rich bank of different viewpoints' (Tseng, 2002, p. 14); Or, as a past student once wrote to me in an email (nd):

It's been nice to understand German culture from an actual German rather than just what I learn from history or reading books!

Thus the ICCA module seems not only to have successfully developed the participants' multiperspectivity, intercultural awareness and competence through the way that they handled the responsibilities intrinsic to the teaching-learning situation and challenges noted above, but have been an enjoyable and worthwhile experience.

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ГЕЈЛ ХОРТОН

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БИРМИНГЕМУ

МЕЂУНАРОДНА АКАДЕМИЈА У БИРМИНГЕМУ

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РЕЗИМЕ

ИЗАЗОВИ ПЕРЦЕПЦИЈЕ: ОД ИДЕАЛА ДО СТВАРНОСТИ

Већина иницијатива на бројним британским универзитетима, које имају за циљ да интегришу домаће и стране студенте, углавном се реализују у оквиру наставних или ваннаставних активности. У периоду од осам година од академске 2007/08. до 2014/15. Универзитет у Бирмингему у Уједињеном краљевству организовао је изборни модул у оквиру Програма развоја личних вештина који је изместио академско учење у друштвено окружење. Модул је имао за циљ да промовише интеркултуралну сарадњу ослањајући се на потенцијале културолошки хетерогене студентске популације као ресурса за интеркултурални

програм учења са циљем остварења Де Витиног идеала. Учесници, домаћи и страни студенти, развијали су свест о интеркултуралности током периода од седам недеља тако што су једни другима били извор информација на сусретима ван факултета, што је цео програм претворило у студију случаја. Да би испунили захтеве курса и освојили 10 кредита (који су улазили у крајњи просек) учесници су морали да воде и предају лични дневник и ураде кратак интервју о томе шта су научили.

Подаци добијени на основу попуњених упитника доводе до закључка да су студенти имали користи од овог модела учења.

Кључне речи: интеркултурална комуникација; личне вештине; узајамно учење.



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