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Internationalising the curriculum for students from Singapore: A field study in the Australian bush

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Abstract: This paper discusses a case study of a summer study abroad program for Singapore students at an Australian university. Issues raised by students and teaching staff are explored using a framework adapted from a Typology of Internationalised Curriculum (Bremer and Van Der Wende, 1995); Best Practice Guidelines for Internationalisation of the Curriculum (Whalley, 1997); and Strategies for Internationalisation (Leask, 2001). Some implications for the design and teaching of summer study abroad programs offered by Australian universities to offshore students are explored within a curriculum design framework. Significant issues include the selection of appropriate teaching staff, inclusion of host country students in group learning activities, and the need for orientation and bridging programs.

Keywords: summer study abroad, international curriculum, international students

Background

In 2000, an estimated 1.8 million students were studying in countries other than their own (Daly and Barker, 2005). In 2004 international students represented 21.5% of all tertiary students in Australia and generated \$1.4 billion per year (Rood, 2004). The perceived benefits of study abroad include the development of characteristics such as: the ability to communicate with diverse groups and work and live in another culture; independence, adaptability, and self-confidence (Grunswieg, 2002; Klahr, 2002). Study abroad programs are however not without their critics. Engle and Engle (2002) write, "... our professional role as educators has too often, these last two decades, morphed insidiously into that of consumer service providers. The result, with rare exceptions, is a foreign landscape increasingly strewn with on-site foreign study programs facilitating an international education which is neither significantly international nor truly educative" (p. 25). Hoffa (2002) argues that the positive outcomes of the overseas experience for students are not only assumed to be the results of carefully planned design, but are as yet unproven.

Summer study abroad (SSA) courses are typically intensive programs of 6-7 weeks duration, such as those offered to American students in Chile and explored by Stephenson (2002). A web search reveals a plethora of summer programs advertised by universities worldwide, including Australian universities. An economic rationale may underlie the summer program offerings of Australian universities however there is also a view of international students in Australia as a type of resource for internationalising the curriculum. Through their participation in the Australian learning environment international students are seen to bring benefits variously described in terms of "cultural diversity for students and staff" (Back, Davis and Olsen, 1996; DEST, 2003; Schapper and Mason, 2004); "breaking down of national myopia" (Schapper and Mason, 2004); "opportunities for multicultural, cross-cultural, culturally inclusive education" (Leask, 2001; Curro and McTaggart, 2003; Schapper and Mason, 2004); and "a positive impact on teaching and curriculum development" (Hamilton, 1998).

This view of study abroad students as a resource for internationalising curriculum and supporting the broader cultural development of local students begs the question: “How do Australian universities internationalise the curriculum for international students who come to study within their summer programs?”

A module within a recent summer study abroad SSA program for a group of twenty-seven Singapore science students at an Australian university provides a case study through which to explore this question. The module (a study of Australian Biodiversity) aims in part to develop students’ global skills and cultural competence, and offer international disciplinary knowledge. The students were resident at a field study centre comprising bunkhouse accommodation, outdoor communal kitchen, and open air teaching space.

This case study surfaces some curriculum issues that may be relevant to other SSAs in Australia. These issues are now discussed using four of the elements of internationalised curriculum (Bremer and Van Der Wende, 1995; Leask, 2001; Whalley, 1997) as a curriculum framework. These elements are conceptualised through a simple outcomes-based curriculum model (Figure 1) adapted from Bell and Lefoe (1998).

1. Global skills and cultural competence
2. Course content that reflects diverse perspectives
3. Teaching and learning activities (TLAs) that support diverse learning modes and engage local with international students
4. Teacher international knowledge and perspectives.

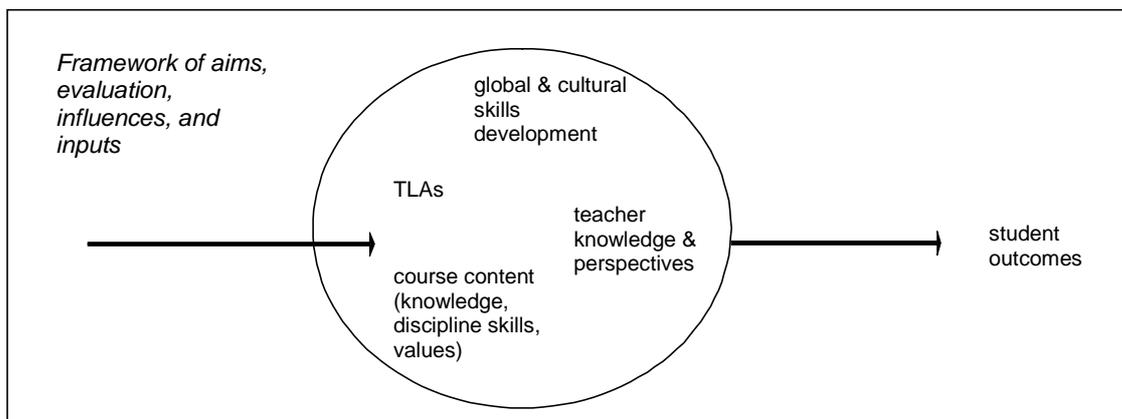


Figure 1: Simple curriculum model

After discussion of issues under each of the four elements, the curriculum design implications for SSA are suggested.

Methodology

This case study is part of a broader study of internationalisation of the curriculum initiatives in Australian universities. The writer spent three days living and interacting with the students, teachers and technical staff at the field centre. In this study the researcher does not claim to offer an objective perspective but rather an interpretation of observations in the light of her experience as an educator. This approach is justified within naturalistic, ethnographic case studies (Stake, 1998) offering the opportunity to better understand the beliefs, motivations, and behaviours of the people involved (Tedlock, 2000).

The lecturer was interviewed at the field site and approximately four weeks after the field trip more than half of the students were interviewed in small groups of five, using semi-structured interview.

Discussion of curriculum implications

Global skills and cultural competence

A successfully internationalised curriculum provides students with the skills and knowledge to perform competently in an international environment. Students' intercultural competence develops out of both an awareness of other cultures and perspectives and awareness of their own culture and its perspectives (Whalley, 1997).

From the discipline lecturer's perspective, social/cultural skills development within the field study program was a particularly important aspect of the informal curriculum.

... they are not only getting academic change but also cultural change ... they are not completely sent in to the unknown over night but they are at the same time getting a mixture, so they can go home with their own stories which will be important for them as an individual.
(Lecturer)

Students interviewed were extremely positive about the skills they had developed through living and studying at the field study centre. They spoke about their understanding of the Australian culture of casual friendliness and informality and saw this as a distinctive part of Australian culture. One student commented that the course was "teaching us to have open heart and mind – getting used to the Australian way".

The absence of local students from the program meant that the only opportunities to develop cultural competence were with the teaching and support staff. The students felt that having host country students studying and living with them on the field trip would have enhanced their development of global skills and cultural competence. The absence of interaction with local students was a great disappointment for the students. One said "We would love to know more of the local students".

The bunk-style accommodation and outdoor cooking/living conditions at the field study centre did prove testing for at least one student who commented, "My bed is infested with insects".

Grunswieg (2002) refers to "the potential for learning and growth that derives from direct interaction with the foreign environment and experiencing the disequilibrium produced by that experience" (p. 17). Most of the students interviewed said that much of their cultural learning at the field centre resulted from moving outside their comfort zone.

Course content

A successfully internationalised curriculum provides students with course content that reflects diverse perspectives on economic, political, environmental and social issues of global importance (Whalley, 1997).

The students explained that for them the possibility of studying Australian content was important:

Mammal trapping – we can't do that in Singapore. Bird watching is totally different here.
(Student)

From the lecturer's perspective the module normally taught to local students became an international one when it was being taught to international students, because the recipients were from a different culture. The modifications made by the Lecturer were to reduce content and pace, and consider required knowledge.

There are some modifications to what I would teach to Australian students ... I realise the students will have an awful lot of knowledge but not necessarily about Australian flora and fauna. So I'm approaching this course thinking on an international level ... I suppose I deal with the information at a slower pace. (Lecturer)

Nevertheless, the observer noted that despite the Lecturer's sensitivity to student needs, students initially were presented with a large amount of information that may have led to confusion and apprehension. For example:

When the tanks are low we change to swampwater. You can drink it but you probably shouldn't. (Lecturer)

We have ticks ... if you have one come and see us - we can flick it out with tweezers.

When later asked how they felt about this early information, the students said initially they did not understand, and in some cases were concerned, in particular about being bitten by creatures they had never seen before, such as ticks.

From the observer's point of view, a lack of prior knowledge could also lead to learning problems, for example, students were required to locate habitats within Australia yet did not know where states and territories were on the map.

Over the course of the SSA program students actively gathered local and Australian information and sometimes discovered the meanings of idiomatic expressions from interactions with the tutors. While this lack of assumed knowledge may be seen to offer another opportunity for learning through 'disequilibrium' where it inhibits learning and/or causes anxiety it may be counter-productive.

Teaching & learning activities

A successfully internationalised curriculum emphasises a wide range of teaching and learning strategies. Teaching/learning strategies support diversity of learning modes (including field studies). The best teaching/learning strategies engage local students with international students. (Whalley, 1997)

The field study experience was greatly appreciated by all of the students interviewed with comments such as:

We experienced nature for ourselves. (Student)

This was a real Aussie bush experience. (Student)

The students were interested in the variety of teaching styles. One student commented " there is more variety, more informal, encouraging, approachable".

However along with this appreciation, all students interviewed said there was an emphasis on what they referred to as rote learning, exemplified by one student as “view a picture of leaf stock, learn it by heart, remember the common names”.

This style of learning was unfavourably compared to an earlier field trip in Singapore with their own university:

[In the Singapore field study] the teachers guided you through thinking ... it is easier to get a straight answer here. (Student)

The researcher recognises that there were many teaching moments she was not in a position to observe during the field study, however when she was present, teaching staff routinely answered questions with information. For example, in viewing the animal traps, the Lecturer explained why the traps were not full, rather than asking the students to speculate on the reasons for this.

One of the student criticisms of the field study experience was in regard to group formation and functioning. The students felt strongly that introductory group-building to help them get to know each other would have made their experience more satisfying. They wanted an introduction in their home country so they knew each other when they got on plane. In the words of one student, “There should be some icebreaker, at least we should know someone’s name”.

Even though an information session was provided after arrival, a second introductory session was also needed because even towards the end of this program there were still students whose names they did not know as they had formed ‘cliques’ and tended to stick with those. Certainly at the field centre the observer noted that not all students appeared to be integrated into their study groups as functioning team members and one student in particular seemed isolated from the others.

All of the students interviewed expressed their desire to learn with host country students. The best and most fruitful way to develop interaction was thorough structured academic work:

We need more interaction. We should be encouraged to work on projects together. I think it is more about interaction through work than having a party. (Student)

Teacher preparation, international knowledge and attributes

Academics should be informed on international issues, standards and practices in the discipline or professional field and refer to international examples and perspectives. (Leask, 2001)

The lecturer’s ability to bring international knowledge and perspectives into the teaching situation was noted by the observer. From the Lecturer’s perspective the introduction of international knowledge and the use of analogy are key strategies for teaching international students.

I was fortunate enough to spend 6 weeks in Singapore. I’m always using analogies...so what I tend to do is bring the students back to what they are familiar with, so that in a foreign context they can actually come back to things back home, take that analogy and understand it a lot easier ... I did do a lot of reading up on the foreign fauna so I can make the comparison. (Lecturer)

Certainly the students seemed to grasp these analogies quickly. On one occasion, the lecturer explained why some mammal traps were empty through the analogy of a Singapore dance party. When the observer asked a student what this meant, the student immediately explained:

It was analogy. Because he has been to Singapore he knows the distance between east and west coast and the weather conditions and this helps us understand the relative distance the animals would have to travel in certain conditions. (Student 10)

The lecturer explained that he actively seeks out international experience to enhance teaching, is enthusiastic about teaching international students, and is prepared to modify behaviour where necessary.

I normally use all sorts of interesting euphemisms and things that I won't use for this course ... I have modified my behaviour to think how they would react ... it does involve a lot more lateral thinking ... you have a cultural element now ... (Lecturer)

The willingness of academic staff to be involved in teaching international students emerged as a significant issue for this lecturer:

I believe you have to be prepared to deal with a lot of difficulties and issues that you have no idea... you can't even contemplate them because you're dealing with another series of cultures. Also I think you have to really want to do it. (Lecturer)

Implications for curriculum design

Building on the simple curriculum model above, a preliminary framework for Australian-based SSA programs (Figure 2) highlights the implications drawn from the discussion above.

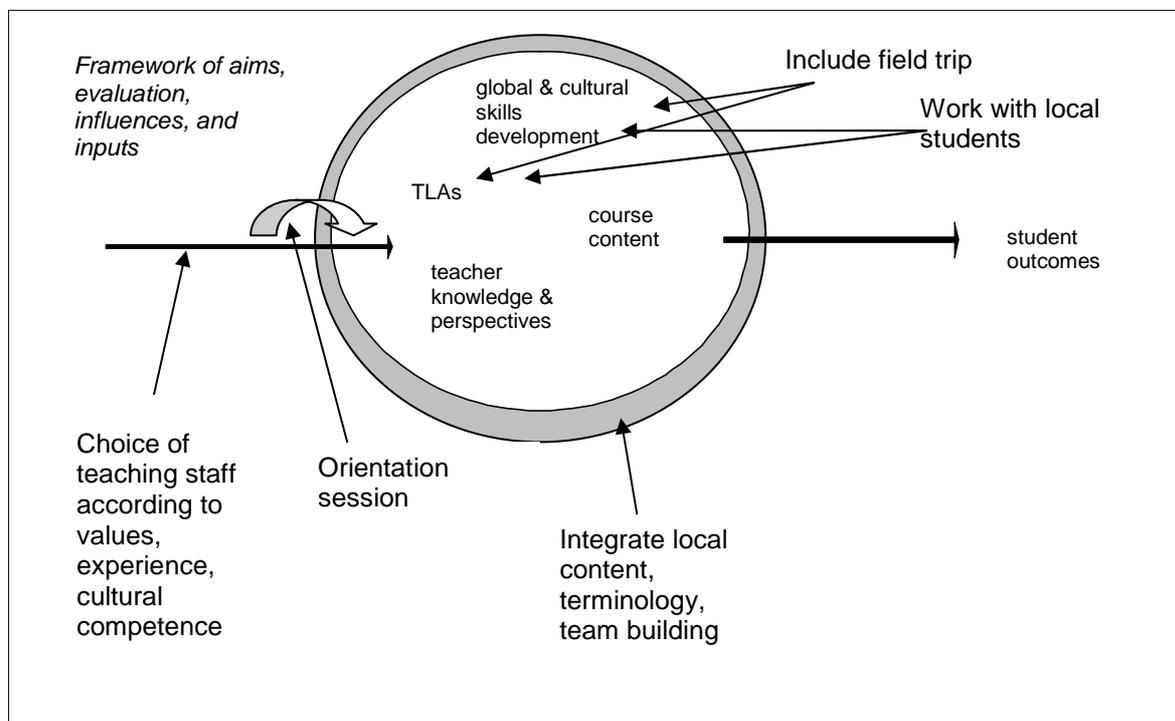


Figure 2: Preliminary curriculum model for SSA programs

These implications comprise:

- orientation sessions prior to and early during SSA in which students develop lines of communication and build teams;
- information and activity integrated into the program to help students bridge their lack of knowledge of local and Australian science and idiomatic expressions;
- fieldwork as an integral element in curriculum design with opportunities for problem-posing and solving activities, cross-cultural teams, and attention to group process; and
- the choice of teaching staff who share values and approaches in keeping with the ethos of international education becomes a key curriculum element.

Conclusion

According to Engle and Engle (2002) the central question for international education concerns “what in the end distinguishes study at home from study abroad: how to create an academic and cultural environment in which students are motivated consistently to penetrate the surface of their host culture enough to apprehend meaningfully and respect a world not habitually their own” (p. 37). Thus far there has been a failure to produce a study abroad model integrating the academic and the cultural-experiential dimensions of the experience (Grunswieg, 2002).

Not all academics believe internationalisation is appropriate or know how to approach internationalisation within their discipline (Bell, 2004). Neither is there much evidence that those who are expected to teach international curriculum have been consulted about curriculum design and implementation. The proposed preliminary curriculum framework for designing Australian summer study abroad programs is just a beginning. Further investigation into the design and teaching of effective study abroad summer programs is urgently needed.

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