

**TEACHING CULTURE!**  
**A MULTI-NATIONAL BLENDED COURSE FOR TEACHERS OF ADULTS IN EUROPE**

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**Abstract**

*The Teaching Culture! project develops inter-cultural awareness in adult educators through blended-learning teacher training courses. The main question was whether inter-cultural awareness could develop through a course which was largely online. We experimented in monitoring the progress of inter-cultural awareness, a set of skills which are notoriously difficult to define. We used learning diaries and portfolios over two rounds of the pilot course, the first round with language teachers and the second for teachers in all subject areas. The results of our study suggest that our approach succeeds in raising inter-cultural awareness.*

**Introduction**

*'To know another's language and not his culture is a very good way to make a fluent fool of one's self.'* (Brembeck, 1997)

In an increasingly mobile and multi-cultural Europe you don't even have to travel to come across other cultures. School teachers are increasingly well prepared for inter-cultural encounters but adult education teachers do not have access to so many training opportunities. The Teaching Culture! project, supported by the Grundtvig strand of the European Union's Socrates programme, sought to remedy this by experimenting with developing a blended learning teacher training course to enable adult education teachers to develop their inter-cultural awareness. One of the greatest uncertainties was whether inter-cultural awareness could be nurtured through a course which was largely online. The project also experimented with how to monitor the development of cultural awareness.

Inter-cultural issues which may arise in the adult education classroom include:

1. Dealing with different attitudes to learning;
2. Dealing with different attitudes to teaching; eg. the teacher as 'sage on the stage' or 'guide on the side'.

3. Building cultural perspectives into teaching materials and activities.
4. Overcoming stereotypes and prejudice in learners, their families and other teachers.
5. Communicating across cultures.

These issues arise to a greater or lesser extent across the whole of adult education. The obvious starting point is language teachers, who were targeted in the first round of the pilot course. However the second round of the pilot course was opened to teachers of all subjects so that the general applicability of the course could be tested. In both pilots there were strict limits on the numbers from each country to ensure a mixture of cultural backgrounds. The group size was 11 in both pilots.

The project partners came from Sweden, Denmark, Lithuania, Austria, Germany, Spain, Ireland and the UK and included professionals from universities, research institutes, teacher training institutions, adult education institutions and cultural associations. There was, therefore, a broad inter-cultural representation from various relevant professions. In addition to technical and administrative support, required roles included personal tutors for each participant, unit tutors to prepare and monitor the use of materials for both the online and face to face units, and a course director to ensure curriculum cohesion.

Often inter-cultural training takes place in mono-cultural groups, so one of the aims with this project was to make the experience inter-cultural right from the start. One common problem for adults taking part in training events is lack of time. Therefore, taking a culturally mixed group of adults for an intensive face-to-face course over several weeks was simply not feasible especially since this would involve long periods in another country for most, if not all, of the participants. The solution proposed was therefore a blended learning course in three modules. The first module is an extended period of collaborative online study followed by the second module, an intensive week of face-to-face activities, with the whole rounded off by a third module, a second online period in which participants devise and try out each other's ideas in the classroom. See the course structure in Table 1 below.

<b>Module</b>	<b>Mode and content</b>
Module 1 (5 months)	Online – inter-cultural basics
Module 2 (1 week)	Residential face to face – experiencing culture
Module 3 (3 months)	Online – applying in the classroom

Table 1: The three module structure.

The project faced two major challenges:

1. Is it possible to develop inter-cultural awareness online?
2. Is it possible to chart the development of inter-cultural awareness online?

## **Module One**

### **1. Developing inter-cultural awareness online**

There are two approaches to inter-cultural training, culture specific and culture general. Culture specific refers to the do's and don'ts guidelines one often gets just prior to a business trip, foreign work placement, or internship to a specific country. This gives information without stressing understanding. Culture general refers to the acquisition of an understanding of what culture means and how it can lead to different behaviours and perceptions. Whilst not of immediate use to a forthcoming visit to a specific culture, it may help to make one more tolerant of ambiguity and differences, which in the long run may be more useful. It was this latter approach which we tried to promote in the Teaching Culture course.

The first module provides an introduction to the major features of inter-cultural considerations by reference to both the basic theory of inter-cultural communication and the participants' own personal experiences. The second module was the face to face component designed to provide inter-cultural experiences by bringing the multi-cultural group together in an unfamiliar location where they would get to know each other. They would also take part in inter-cultural activities which test their ability to operate in a different culture. The third and final module is where participants get the opportunity to combine theory and personal experience in planning activities for their own classroom as well as trying out their colleagues' ideas to judge how well the ideas travel across cultural boundaries and how to adapt them for use in different cultural contexts.

In adopting the culture-general approach, it is usual to lead participants to recognise their own cultural background before going on to examine features of other cultures and their own reactions to these. However, this was not explicit enough for the participants of the first pilot round, and therefore in the second round the project group devised a story metaphor to chart this learning journey. The story was based around the idea of the group coming together in the virtual campus. The resulting story and corresponding modules are shown in Table 2 below.

<b>Module and title</b>	<b>Mode and content</b>
1. International campus: Think of your experience as a treasure chest.	Online: Grounding in inter- cultural communication
2. Intercultural encounters:	Face-to-face: Inter-cultural

Think of your learning as a journey.	experiences
3. Intercultural classroom: Think of your lesson as an experiment.	Online: Trial of inter-cultural materials in the classroom through online collaboration.

Table 2: The story metaphor across the three modules

The story metaphor was most strongly developed in the units of Module 1 as shown below in Table 3.

Unit title	Unit aim
1. Welcome to the Moodle campus	Familiarisation with the online learning environment
2. This is how we do things at home	Exploring your own and others' cultures
3. Do you really only use Windows around here?	Exploring the metaphor of culture as the software of the mind.
4. Is there method behind this madness?	Theoretical background to inter-cultural communication
5. What would they say back home?	Cultures as depicted in the mass media
6. You'll never believe what happened!	Role play: A critical incident in Cologne
7. Don't forget your toothbrush	Preparation for the residential

Table 3: Units in Module 1 – Intercultural campus

Attempts were made to vary the activities as much as possible during the online sections and to avoid the tendency to make online courses heavily text-based. The exercises in Module 1 therefore included reports on the participants' own culture, exploration of metaphors, choosing representative pictures, collecting evidence from media, and individual interviews and role plays. This achieved two goals, the first being to make the course accessible to those whose skills in English are not so high and the second being to make the course as experiential as possible since this is deemed most effective in inter-cultural training.

## 2. Monitoring the development of inter-cultural awareness online

Inter-cultural awareness is manifest in the reactions of an individual when faced with an inter-cultural situation. Those reactions are based mainly on an individual's innermost beliefs and values and can be tempered to some extent by training and awareness-raising. These deeply personal attributes are largely hidden from view and difficult to make explicit. There are also important ethical questions relating to the extent to which we can aim to tamper with and change these beliefs as described by Byram (2000). Another indication of the sensitivity of the issue is that the promoters of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages have considered and failed to come up with indicators of inter-cultural skills.

### **Learning diary and portfolio**

The project team therefore concluded that the most effective approach to charting inter-cultural awareness development was through self-reporting and self-assessment. The approach adopted was to encourage reflective learning through the compilation of (1) a learning diary, in which participants recorded their progress, feelings, triumphs and difficulties; and (2) a portfolio in which participants could collect their work, notes and other material of interest. These two items were shared periodically with the personal tutor which each participant was allocated. This was usually the project partner in the country where the participant was based. In most cases this ensured the participant had face to face meetings throughout the duration of the course but in a couple of cases the distances involved meant that these tutorial sessions were also online or at least by telephone. Table 4 below shows where the tutors fit in to the overall course structure.

Personal tutor	In the same country, monitors progress
Unit tutors	Plan and present course material
Course director	Ensures continuity and cohesion
Background IT (instructional technology), financial and administrative support	

Table 4: Support structure

### **Collaborative activities**

Another important part of the strategy was to create opportunities for reflection by promoting collaborative activities across cultures as the main method of content delivery. Many of the activities across the whole course required working in small groups with participants from different cultures. Participants were also required to use their immediate circle of family, friends and colleagues as cultural informants for finding out about their own cultural background. During the face to face residential period one of the tasks is for participants to form small inter-cultural working groups for the final teaching activity in which group members try out and evaluate each other's tasks as well as their own, once back in their own home environment.

## **Module 2**

### **The residential**

The residential in the first pilot took place in Lithuania, a country unknown by most of our participants except our one Lithuanian participant, and therefore a really inter-cultural experience for all. An important element of the residential was an exercise designed to reveal the participants' values with respect to their teaching. This was the subject of a useful plenary on the last day about the implications of participants' bringing different sets of values to their classrooms. In addition to purely pedagogical and team building exercises, various inter-cultural experiences were timetabled in. One was a tutorial in the Lithuanian language and another was a city-wide treasure hunt through Vilnius which required our participants to solicit information from passers-by thereby initiating contact with local people.

In Lithuania, our hosts organised dancing classes so that our participants could learn one or two traditional Lithuanian dances. The dances are a much more important part of Lithuanian culture than in many other European cultures partly because they were suppressed or discouraged during the Soviet era. The school children assigned to the task did a very good job of coaching our participants. The biggest challenge was for our participants to perform, in front of the mainly local Lithuanian audience, the two dances they had learned at a folk dance evening organised especially for our benefit. The performance was followed by a buffet reception which in fact turned out to be more of a challenge for the project partners than the participants who had had the benefit of getting to know the Lithuanians all afternoon. This demonstrated the value of personal contact quite forcibly and the lesson was not lost on the project partners. A basic theme running throughout the project is 'from virtual to real' but sometimes it was the other way round as when the participants created an online travelogue of the residential period which can be seen at [http://www.teaching-culture.de/en/events/litauen/travelogue/travelogue\\_start.htm](http://www.teaching-culture.de/en/events/litauen/travelogue/travelogue_start.htm).

## **Module 3**

### **The lesson exchange**

For some participants this was the most anticipated part of the course. During the residential week they came together in small inter-cultural groups of three to four persons to create inter-cultural lessons around a common theme. The themes which emerged during the residential were

- non-verbal communication
- the use of pictures

- developing empathy or tolerance.

Groups formed easily during the residential prior to creating, trialling and exchanging teaching ideas. The biggest problem in this final module was the staggered summer holiday across Europe which made regular online communication difficult since the project partners had naturally insisted on inter-cultural working groups. It also affected the participants' ability to trial the lesson plans with exam or induction periods intervening.

### **Challenges**

The project organizers were able to learn a great deal from the first round, and lessons learned were implemented in the second pilot which at the time of writing is still in session. The second pilot invited participants from any subject area and this attracted a very wide range of participants including art and dance teachers, online learning consultants, multimedia teachers and economics lecturers, which will create a challenge in forming groups for the exchange of teaching ideas in Module 3.

Two of the problems encountered have already been mentioned namely staggered holidays and the need for a more explicit thread running through the course. These have both been addressed; the first by re-scheduling the course and the second by the development of the story metaphor. Another problem was that a common language had to be chosen for the course. One of the main aims was to foster communication between the participants, thus facility in English was a requirement, and it then became a question of what level was sufficient. We decided on B1[1] according to the Common European Framework of Reference. Even so there is a delicate balance to be struck between the amount of background theory to be considered as a basic minimum and over-burdening participants with language which is above their level.

In some cases this problem can be overcome by ensuring that all rubrics, guidance, and instructions generated by the project developers are at an appropriate level. For example, an article was specially written for one of the units and this was explicitly simplified for the second pilot. This was done using online tools such as The Compleat Lexical Tutor (<http://www.lextutor.ca/>), which analyzes texts to show which word lists the vocabulary used belongs to. It was therefore possible to substitute uncommon words with more common words in many but not all cases. The readability analysis contained within the text processing program was also used to reduce average sentence length and number of passive sentences.

The other major problem unsurprisingly was misunderstandings. To a certain extent, an inter-cultural communication course thrives on misunderstandings in that they provide a rich fund of critical incidents which serve both to illustrate problems and which can be used as

exercises for deepening understanding later on. The potential for misunderstanding was all the greater because we were working mostly online. The main example from the first round occurred when we invited participants to post pictures representing their culture.

When one of the participants posted a picture of the Virgin Mary, some of the other participants assumed that this meant that she was fervently religious. However, such assumptions were not voiced openly through the course website. Rather they were voiced privately between participants or to tutors by email. It was not until the residential week when a session on the use of pictures was scheduled that an explanation of the picture was finally forthcoming. The participant had posted the picture to represent the differences she had experienced moving from a Protestant part of Germany to a Catholic region where religious icons are much more common. This incident illustrates two points. First was the need to define tasks carefully when working online. The problem arose when the participant did not realise she was meant to comment on her choices after allowing an initial period for reaction by the rest of the group. The second point is that while the course was carefully planned, there was also a need and a willingness to amend the programme when the necessity arose.

## **Benefits**

There were many benefits to running two pilot rounds, one of these being that we could use the participants from the first round as consultants to the round 2 participants when they come to planning their inter-cultural classroom activities. By sharing their newly gained expertise and further experience gained since the end of the course it is hoped that this will be an important additional benefit of the course.

## **Results**

What sort of reflections does the learning diary give rise to? The following extracts are quoted as evidence that the online section of the course does give rise to real increases in inter-cultural awareness. They are taken from the pilot 2 participants, who have yet to meet face to face at the time of writing.

1. “It was my first chat and I liked it. Talking, communicating, replying, listening, disclosing - that way we may get to know our own stereotypes as well as the more hidden ones in the media. Knowing my dialogue partners leads to the wish to understand them.” Birgit
2. “I’ve enjoyed this lively expression and exchange of messages and reflections, and I find the asynchronous online format useful for such discussions. I like the pause to stimulate my own thinking before I write back to you, and sometimes I may have an

inner dialogue for a while before I answer, and maybe even not, when I'm too busy elsewhere." Susanne

3. "I really enjoyed this unit because of its really practical and everyday-life implications. Unit 5 was a very important step for my intercultural understanding." Magdalena
4. "I would like to tell you that I was really enjoyed about the last unit and the chat was a very new and interesting experience for me. All your contributions made me think a lot about the influence of mass media and my own stereotypical views and their origins." Brigitte

There is greater interaction in the second round, and this has made for a richer experience for all. It is difficult to know whether this is due to the individuals involved or whether it can be attributed to the improved presentation and structure of the course. The quotes below from current participants reflect this:

1. "And until now all my expectations have [been] fulfilled and every day I am looking forward to the news from all the other participants." Brigitte
2. "I like working in multicultural settings and thought this course would be interesting [and so] it proves to be." Birgit

It must be admitted that using this devolved system of recording inter-cultural awareness development means that the results are very personal, known sometimes only to the participant's personal tutor apart from the participant. Indicators of progress emerge by proxy through evaluations undertaken at key points of the course such as half way through Module 1, at the end of Module 2, and at the end of Module 3. Since the inception of the project, the project team has been working on producing a set of can-do statements regarding cultural awareness for participants to assess themselves against. We are making progress on such a list but have yet to test it out on any of the pilot groups.

## **Conclusion**

The hope is that the course developed by the project can be adapted and used by others once the project is over. The blend of online and face-to-face contributes to its success, with online Module 1 providing a solid basis from which to work in the face-to-face Module 2. The residential is an important transformative event which builds on the awareness set in train during the online period and helps to build the trust necessary for the participants to work more closely

together in developing and sharing teaching ideas. The two pilot rounds have been invaluable in fine-tuning the course. As we enter the read-write era of the Internet, the so-called Web 2.0, more interactivity could be built into the online section of the course thereby making this part even more inter-cultural.

## Notes

1. Level B is an independent user; B1 is defined as 'Threshold'. Find out more at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common\\_European\\_Framework\\_of\\_Reference\\_for\\_Languages#Levels](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_European_Framework_of_Reference_for_Languages#Levels)
2. Readers interested in finding out more about the project are invited to request a video DVD about the first round from the author or see a reduced-quality version on the project website (<http://www.teaching-culture.de/en/events/litauen/travelogue/video.htm>).

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## Editor's notes:

This presentation was made as a regular session at the Webheads in Action Online Convergence on November 19, 2005.

- The session took place in the Elluminate presentation room at Learning Times. A recording was made and can be heard at <http://home.learningtimes.net/learningtimes?go=1042139>.