FIRST THINGS FIRST

Ensuring a Safe and Inclusive Environment as a Foundation for an International Curriculum

Radboud University
First Things First: Ensuring a Safe and Inclusive Environment as a Foundation for an International Curriculum
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Preface

This experience book is part of the valorisation and dissemination programme of the ‘First Things First’ Comenius project conducted at Radboud University by Liedeke Plate, Professor of Culture and Inclusivity and leader of the project, in collaboration with Sandy Barasa, Senior Lecturer at Radboud In’to Languages and in the department of Communication and Information Sciences. An experienced educational expert in Intercultural Competence and Skills, dr. Barasa designed the training material, conducted the workshops and training, and coordinated discussion sessions with students and other participants. Daniela Piangiolino, international student in the Arts and Culture Studies Bachelor programme, assisted in various organisational and administrative tasks as well as with the creation of this experience book. She also brought an indispensable student perspective to the project team.

This experience book describes what we did to make our international Bachelor programme of Arts and Culture Studies (ACS) at Radboud University more inclusive. We describe the steps we took, reflect on the challenges we encountered, and provide tips and suggestions based on our own experiences. We also review literature to support our observations and claims with scientific research, triangulate our findings, and provide theoretical background for our experiential claims.

Our hope for this book is that it will find its way among all stakeholders, from students to teachers and staff, who are invested in making their international learning environments more inclusive and so, more enjoyable and beneficial for all. If diversity and internationalisation of our campuses and educational programmes are facts that need to be dealt with, making them safe and inclusive is a task incumbent upon us all. To evoke our university’s motto: You have a part to play! We hope this book will help you define that part.
Acknowledgements

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Radboud University

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experts in language and communication

NRO
Introduction

“First Things First” and the international classroom

“First Things First: Ensuring a safe and inclusive environment as a foundation for an international curriculum” is a Comenius project funded by NRO from May 2019 to January 2021. It starts from the premise of the international classroom: that by working together on (international) issues, students gain intercultural competences and learn to work in diverse teams (Internationaliseringsagenda hoger onderwijs 2018, p. 11).

We prioritise the creation of a safe and inclusive environment as the very first step to internationalisation and the international classroom. As we discovered with our own international bachelor programme, currently, students in the Netherlands do not profit fully from the benefits of the international classroom. Dutch and international students do not easily mix and consequently, do not acquire the international competences necessary to be successful in their 21st-century personal and professional lives. “First Things First” therefore sought to redevelop our curriculum in the first year to include international and intercultural competences.

For this, we developed a programme in the context of the students’ mentoring programme, consisting of mandatory meetings that do not carry credit but are essential for making the transition from secondary or higher vocational education to university. This programme was then integrated in the formal curriculum through small-group assignments in two courses – one in the first semester, one in the second – as an intervention to instill international competences and create the safe and inclusive learning environment requisite for students to fully benefit from the international classroom.

What is an international classroom?

A basic definition of the international classroom in the context of the Netherlands would be: A class taught in English, with students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, in which international perspectives and cross-cultural understanding are developed and utilised.

The safe and inclusive international classroom

For an international classroom to be successful, it is not enough that professors lecture in English. The classroom also needs to be a safe and inclusive space. As we learned from the literature, students can only begin to share multiple perspectives and develop a cross-cultural capability if a safe and inclusive learning environment is first created (Caruana 2010; Commons et al. 2012). This then is our key take-away and the premise of “First Things First: Ensuring a safe and inclusive environment as a foundation for an international curriculum.”
What is an inclusive international classroom?

An inclusive classroom can be defined as: **a classroom in which all students feel welcome.** For an international classroom, this means attending to the social, emotional and learning needs of all students - international and domestic. The Indiana University Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning states: “inclusive teaching and learning practices recognise that diverse perspectives influence the way students engage with the subject matter of the course and help students build on these perspectives to develop skills in the field.”

Inclusiveness in the classroom requires work and contribution from everyone involved. It starts from self-recognition of who one is, how one identifies, and whence one comes; and how these dimensions influence how one engages with the course - whether as a student or a teacher. It then builds on this self-recognition to guide students develop their skills and knowledge. First steps to achieve inclusion in the classroom are cultural awareness and sensitivity (Bucholz & Sheffler 2009; Salazar et al. 2009). Cultural awareness is being conscious of the existence of other cultures besides one’s own. Cultural sensitivity means appreciating and respecting other cultures.

What is a safe classroom?

A safe classroom is one that allows “students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors” (Holley and Steiner 2005, p. 50). There has been much discussion and debate about the concept of the classroom as a safe space, including resistance to it (e.g., Egginton 2018; Lukianoff & Haidt 2018). However, evidence mounts that a safe and inclusive classroom is crucial to students’ learning and well-being. Holley and Steiner (2005) acknowledge that being in a safe classroom enables students to learn more and better. They discovered that “the vast majority of students consider the creation of a safe space to be very or extremely important and that the majority of students perceive that they learn more in such a classroom” (p. 61). (Micro) aggressions – from teachers or fellow students, and ranging from stereotyping and inappropriate jokes to being dismissed or ignored - can make students feel unwanted and unwelcome. These have not only an adverse impact on students’ self-esteem and well-being, but also reduce their sense of belonging, which affects motivation and success (Smith et al. 2020).
In the context of the international classroom, a safe and inclusive classroom starts from awareness of and sensitivity to cultural differences and a desire to be inclusive and equitable. As such, it does not necessarily treat all students exactly the same; on the contrary, educational equity is about fairness and inclusion. It starts from the recognition that the playing field is uneven in order to support all students’ learning, regardless of their abilities or social and cultural background, gender, race, class, language, religion, etc. Inclusive teaching uses course materials and examples from diverse sources in discussions and assignments to make everyone feel included; as such, it is international, multicultural, and decolonial. It uses inclusive language; that is, language that is free of bias, that recognizes the individuality and humanity of all people, and that avoids perpetuating prejudicial beliefs (see the recommendations on bias-free language in Chapter 5 of the APA Publication Manual, 7th Edition). And it seeks to create a sense of belonging; to make everyone feel welcome, valued, as an important part of the life and activity of the class (Williams and Evans 2020, p. 29).

### Cultural dimensions

Hofstede (1991); and Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (1993)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Power distance index</th>
<th>How comfortable are you with power influence i.e., acceptance of inequality in distribution of power?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sequential vs synchronic time</td>
<td>How do you manage your time i.e., strictly or flexibly?</td>
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<td>Long vs short term orientation</td>
<td>How much emphasis do you place on planning for the future?</td>
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<td>Specific vs diffuse</td>
<td>How separate is your private life from the public?</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
<td>How different are your expectations with respect to gender roles and expression?</td>
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<td>Universalism vs particularism</td>
<td>How do you adhere to rules vs friendships/relationships with others?</td>
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<td>Uncertainty avoidance</td>
<td>How tolerant are you of ambiguity and unpredictability vs known structure?</td>
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<td>Inner vs outer directed</td>
<td>How do you deal with control i.e., taking charge vs being controlled?</td>
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In this Experience Book we report on our project. We describe what we did in our programme to develop international and cross-cultural perspectives and understandings among our students. We also provide tips and suggestions on how you, too, can take steps towards making your international classroom – and the campus at large – more inclusive. The book includes a section on the international classroom online. Indeed, when in the Spring of 2020, COVID-19 forced us to move our classes online, we immediately felt compelled to address the challenges of the inclusive international classroom online, as we sensed the effects of the corona pandemic were particularly impacting our international students and that the online and hybrid or hy-flex international online classroom held its own inclusion challenges.

“First Things First” was focused on the (physical) classroom and revolved around the formal curriculum. However, it soon spilled over to the informal curriculum, as our students picked up on the project and developed it further in spaces beyond the formal classroom, such as the study association (see pp. 45-48). As we explain, this snowball effect is important to the project’s aim of achieving a safe and inclusive learning environment for all. We cherish the hope that this book, and the conversations it aims to initiate and feed, will similarly help to scale up our efforts to ensure a safe and inclusive environment as a foundation for an international curriculum.
Our steps

"First Things First" redeveloped our first-year mentoring programme and integrated it in the curriculum as a means to create the safe and inclusive learning environment requisite for students to fully benefit from the international classroom. The Arts and Culture Studies (ACS) mentoring programme is a flanking programme running alongside the formal curriculum. It helps first-year students’ transition to university by having them discuss topics such as time management, study load, study-related stress, side jobs and career opportunities in small tutor-led groups.

These topics were extended to include intercultural aspects such as culture shock, intercultural awareness, intercultural communication, working in multicultural groups, and cultural inclusion and adaptation.

This addition prompted the mentoring programme to be directly connected to the curriculum as a reinforcement, especially in courses where students are required to work on projects in small workgroups, which are likely internationally diverse. "First Things First" ensured that international competences are integrated in the formal curriculum and treated as a fundamental contribution to the ACS programme. In this way, we sought to facilitate the academic and social integration of new students while unburdening the formal curriculum.

These are the steps we took to accomplish the mission:

1. ACS past students’ experiences
2. ACS curriculum: integration of intercultural competences
3. Established a Sounding Board
We started with an interview with ACS students to obtain feedback from their observations and experiences. In a nutshell, we learnt that:

- there is a major rift between Dutch and international students - such that each group prefers to interact with its own peers, especially in academic projects
- international students do not always feel safe and included in class, in workgroups, and even on campus and beyond
- these disparities are disappointing for most international students since part of the deal to study at our University was to learn more about the Dutch and interact with them

This feedback confirmed our observations and feedback we had received earlier, and we were confident that our project was set to address them.

We then used the feedback and other collected information as the backbone to redesign the ACS programme in a bid to make it more inclusive for international students. This was guided by Caruana’s (2010, p. 4) three principles of the internationalised curriculum in order to facilitate students to:

- understand the global context of their studies.
- develop awareness of how knowledge is globally linked, and
- prepare them for viewing change as positive and managing it effectively in a global context.

To this end, our “First Things First” project was integrated in “European Culture,” a required semester-long course whose focus on “Europe” as a narrative whose content and form change across time made it well suited to our project. The course would conclude in poster presentations in the form of an exhibition titled Exhibiting Europe, for which task students would collaborate in workgroups of 5-6 members from different cultural backgrounds, select a topic, and then design themed visuals that showcase it. This set-up complied with Caruana’s principles through its incorporated project which sought to be managed collaboratively and effectively through linked competencies from diverse backgrounds within the workgroups. Additionally, the course content placed the whole course in a global context in relation to other continental cultures.
Established a Sounding Board

Another step was based on our overall ambition to extend the project’s benefits to all international programmes at Radboud University. As one of the ways to achieve this, we established a Sounding Board (SoBo) in order to collaborate with academic, administration and support staff, as well as students, from different programmes and faculties. The SoBo comprised 10 members. We invited teaching staff, department heads, deans and and student advisors from different programmes and faculties, people working in the international office and at Radboud In’to Languages, as well as from education support and the Human Resources department, and a board member of the study association.

Next, we presented the project to the members of the Sounding Board. It was positively received and they enriched it through their feedback, comments and suggestions, such as recommending we include more international staff members on the SoBo and reach out to international students’ associations.

Project introduction to staff

Given that the project was immersed in ACS, it was imperative to acquaint the teaching staff with its existence, which we did as the next step. It was received with a lot of positive feedback and interest, and curiosity on how to create a safe and inclusive environment in the classroom.

Project implementation

The introduction of the project to the staff was followed by the next step of holding a meeting with the teaching staff focusing on the international classroom as a theme. The teachers’ role to create, foster and maintain a safe and inclusive learning community is integral to the project. Therefore, we held meetings with mentors and teaching staff to share experiences and best practices on how to identify and positively utilise cultural diversity amongst students fruitfully; and how to utilise different strategies to navigate cultural challenges in an ACS international classroom.
Workshop 1

With the arrival of the international students on the ACS Bachelor’s programme, we immediately launched a kick-start programme in this step. It was designed to help students get quickly up to speed.

The ACS kick-start programme takes place in the first two weeks of classes. It aims to acquaint first-year students with the new academic life and to help them master basic study skills necessary for making their studies a success. Fully integrated with their programme of courses, it helps them to quickly get adjusted to the exciting but intense and fast-paced life in a Dutch university environment.

As part of this kick-start programme, we devised and incorporated a workshop focused on intercultural awareness to centre on international collaboration.

**Rationale:** As part of their study, first-year students soon find themselves interacting with people from different cultures, both lecturers and classmates and peers. For example, in some courses, the students are required to work in small workgroups. These groups will comprise students from different and diverse cultures – who need to work together by interacting and supporting each other in order to succeed in their group projects and assignments. For such projects to run smoothly, the students need to be able to communicate by sharing ideas, discussing, and giving/receiving feedback with cultural competence including sensitivity and awareness.

**Objectives:** Create awareness that different cultures have their own practices and expectations (unwritten rules); specifically on how students can work together, interact with each other and also with lecturers in a culturally diverse group.

**kick-start (ˈkɪkˌstaːt)**
*vb (tr)*
1. to start (a motorcycle engine) by means of a pedal that is kicked downwards
2. informal to make (something) active, functional, or productive again; to start or reinvigorate (an activity, system, or process)
Workshop 1 in pictures
2019 & 2020
The course’s project on Exhibiting Europe was to be implemented by students in international workgroups. Hence, it was of utmost importance to create workgroups that adhered to the project’s requirement of each group having 5-6 members from diverse cultural backgrounds. As part of our “First Things First” project’s aim, we endeavoured to train and support all the students to create a safe and inclusive environment in their workgroup teams. This would create the global link not only in the course’s theory, but also in the practical aspects in which different cultures are integrated to work together to achieve a common goal.

In this step, each group member was given a “cultural map” and asked to fill in their own cultural characteristics in terms of cultural dimensions. The results would be used in the upcoming workshop to design each team’s workgroup culture.

Workshop 2

In this ensuing step, a workshop was conducted focusing on each of the created workgroups.

**Rationale:** Group tasks should not only lead to a good grade, but should also be an investment and a pleasurable experience for the team. For our international workgroups, this was to be achieved through “sowing diversity and harvesting inclusivity.” If managed effectively, workgroups with intercultural members from diverse backgrounds can yield a very enriching experience and remarkable results from the diverse contributions. However, it is only through “sustained effort” (Ellsworth et al. 2020) that international and intercultural groups can be managed effectively, by all being settled in a safe space with a sense of belonging (Holley and Steiner, 2005).

**Objective:** to ensure that all members feel safe, included and valued. In order to achieve this,

- each workgroup needed to create and adapt itself to its own group culture. The starting point was to compare and contrast the individual cultural maps created earlier by each workgroup member. The differences and similarities were brainstormed upon for ways to make them inclusive rather than divisive. All the information was used to create the workgroup’s culture.

- the created group culture was introduced, brainstormed and agreed upon in the first meeting for the members to be better acquainted with each other; and to be guided in viewing diversity and cultural differences as an investment. Some of the dimensions agreed upon included: how to give each other feedback, for instance, whether to give direct or indirect negative feedback; what deadlines mean, that is, are they strict or flexible; what politeness is in the team, etc.

- from the initial workgroup meeting, every member would have an equal opportunity to contribute in creating the group culture. Additionally, all members should feel welcome and supported in working together despite cultural differences. This creates inclusion and equality and makes everyone feel valued.
Exhibiting Europe: European Culture project presentations

In this huge step, students presented their projects to the other students and lecturers present. Besides exhibiting interesting projects, the students demonstrated their ability to work in a relatively big and very diverse international team, as well as being open to discovering the different ways in which other workgroups decided to display their artworks and projects.
Town hall meeting and the cultural adjustment curve

Although contested, many believe that there is a predictable pattern of stages students undergo when they study abroad. For a student, being aware of these phases of adapting to a new culture can make the process easier. For us, as facilitators, knowing about the phases enabled us to respond to and address our students’ feelings. Thus as the next step, we scheduled a town hall meeting in late November/early December, when the days in the Netherlands are getting short, dark, cold, and wet, the honeymoon phase is over and the novelty and excitement of the new has worn off, the Christmas break is still a few weeks away, and the first, often low course grades have been received; in short, at the low point in the curve. This crisis is also a period of intense personal conflict and anxiety, and a moment when homesickness may increase.

NB. There are two widely referenced models: Lysgaard (1955) and Zeller and Mosier (1993). Both agree on a “honeymoon” beginning followed by a dip when the newness wears off, in turn followed up by recovery.
The purpose of the town hall meeting is to hear the students’ views. There are no rules, except that students get to say everything they want to say, and representatives of the programme listen and ask questions. It is important at this stage in their studies that students are given the opportunity to express their worries, concerns, and struggles adjusting to the Dutch education system, share these with each other and with their teachers and/or study advisors, and so also offer feedback regarding their studies and learning environment. This feedback can then be used to further improve the programme.
Evaluation is a crucial part of the Comenius project. Because evaluation is a continuous and iterative process, we monitored the project at all stages and in three levels: immediate, short-term and long-term (Sallis 2002).

1 Workgroup process monitoring

We frequently checked individual and workgroup progress informally through meetings between Sandy and the students. The objective of these meetings was to brainstorm and identify existing challenges and loopholes in the workgroups and forecast possible issues and solutions. These meetings and interactions enabled us to identify intercultural challenges arising in their workgroups as they prepared for the Exhibiting Europe event and provide immediate solutions to issues that arose.

For instance, in some workgroups:

**Work time** had not been set. Thus some, especially Dutch students in this particular group, had not anticipated being expected to do group assignments on weekends.

Advice: each member individually filled in convenient times in a scheduler. The group compared the results and established their project “work-week culture” based on the days and times each was available for the project.

**Language** was assumed to be English, but Dutch members spoke Dutch to each other, making internationals feel excluded.

Advice: the workgroup agreed that whenever the Dutch students spoke their language, international members should also speak their native language. In this way, the whole workgroup would be more conscious and activated to use English for mutual understanding.

**Gender and cultural intersection** was a challenge, for example a student felt awkward as the only male in the workgroup.

Action and advice: we discussed gender in our own cultural perspectives and brainstormed on issues that could arise in the diverse workgroup, and agreed on incorporating a workgroup culture to promote gender equality and inclusivity.

In another workgroup, a female student was uncomfortable with a male student’s behaviour during meetings in his room.

Action and advice: Similar to the previous group, we discussed gender from a cultural perspective and advised the workgroup to hold their meetings in a neutral location, for instance on campus, as a workgroup culture that is inclusive for all.
Mid-project evaluation

At mid-project, we wrote a report for the SoBo visualising the progression of the project’s activities. We also monitored progress made on students’ academic and social integration. This was done by interviewing some workgroup members about their group’s culture to find out how their team was progressing and how they were interacting with peers from different cultural backgrounds.

Many students admitted that setting and adapting to a workgroup culture was not easy, but once done, it was very constructive, and that they enjoyed working in international teams. Gratifyingly, the workgroups whose challenges had been solved through our advice were collaborating well and appreciated our contribution. However, in spite of the successes, one notable point was that Dutch students on the ACW and Pre-Master programmes had the impression that international students kept to themselves socially. Simultaneously, some international students felt that Dutch students were too busy amidst themselves socially, especially when out of class.

The workgroup assignments and tasks, however, were enabling them to interact and collaborate more. Here we need to point out that unfortunately, not all workgroups could provide us with feedback at mid-project as some claimed they were very busy.

In future, such evaluations should be conducted during a scheduled session with mandatory attendance.
Follow-up in “Cultural Theory” course

The workgroup project was followed up by another group project in the second semester. The objective for this step was for students to implement what they had learnt in a new setting and without immediate guidance, as we would only evaluate their international and cross-cultural competences as manifested in their products. For their “Cultural Theory” course, students formed new groups and collaborated on a new project, this time culminating in a pecha-kucha presentation. Unfortunately, at this stage, COVID-19 intervened, interfering with our plans for evaluating the project’s success.

Long-term evaluation and implementation of the project

Since the beginning of the project, our goal was to practically implement the findings and end-results innovatively by integrating them in the curriculum. In this close to the last step, we focused on the project’s results as well as the implementation of findings and lessons learnt.

For the findings, we revisited Sandy’s interviews with some students.

Based on students’ feedback, as well as the snowball effect of our “First Things First” project described on pp. 45-48, it was clear that after our interventions and advice, the students were currently more cross-culturally competent by:

- knowing more about culture in general;
- being more aware of not only their own culture, but other cultures as well in terms of similarities and differences;
- accepting and respecting each other’s culture and cross-cultural differences.

All these competences led to more and positive interaction with each other; more successful collaborations; and the sharing of different perspectives. This is similar to findings reported by Alfranseder et al. (2011); Jones (2010); Leask (2009); and Montgomery (2010). Therefore, we can safely conclude that the students are now more likely to be aware of the international (global) nature of their study programme, and how intercultural competence can positively contribute to a safe environment for all, and how this contributes to more gratifying social and professional, academic experiences.

Additionally, they appear better prepared for global competence, defined as “as a multidimensional capacity that encompasses the ability to examine global and intercultural issues; understand and appreciate different perspectives and viewpoints; interact successfully and respectfully with others; and take action towards sustainability and collective well-being” (OECD 2019; see also the OECD Learning Compass 2030).
In the wake of our project’s focus on our international ACS programme, we decided that a further step was also necessary to devote attention to issues of intercultural awareness and sensitivity in the Dutch ACW programme.

**Rationale:** While the ACW courses are mainly in Dutch and the programme as a whole has a different focus, geared towards matters of Dutch cultural policy and organisation, ACW students also have courses in common with ACS. These, then, are taught in English, and often require collaboration. Therefore, it was important that they too be initiated into the rudiments of intercultural awareness, sensitivity and competence.

**Objectives:** Rather than introducing the ACW students to all kinds of stereotypes about other cultures – we believe such generalizations do more harm than good, as the French, Chinese, Americans, etc. are no more homogeneous cultures than the Dutch – we therefore held a workshop where discussion was started by comparing differences between cultures within the Netherlands, talking about the differences between the places and families and their origins, pointing out stereotypes and judgements that might disrupt smooth communication. We explored issues of politeness, directness and personal space amongst others, in order to understand possible views which international students might associate with Dutch people and culture.

This workshop offered the ACW students a more open perspective to look not only at their Dutch peers, but also (and especially) at the international students in Arts and Culture Studies. This would be a good starting point to collaborate effectively with international peers both academically and socially in a sensitised safe and inclusive way.
Findings and recommendations based on observations and experiences

As we explained in the previous section (“Our steps”), we met with students in teams and individually throughout the project to monitor and evaluate progress, share experiences, and provide guidance. Some of the issues that arose include the following:

1. Dutch students tend to opt to form groups with fellow Dutch students

2. The benefits of intercultural competence are not immediately clear to all

3. Students focus on the final grade

4. Students only share experiences after the course

5. Inclusion is beyond campus

6. Teachers are busy people
The majority of students concede that they feel safer when allowed to choose their own workgroup. However, we discovered that when they do so, then in most cases, they end up staying in their familiar teams and would rather not work with anybody new. For the Dutch students, collaboration with international students is experienced as a stressful extra effort, as it is easier and faster for them to do things the (Dutch) way as they are used to, such as discuss things in Dutch rather than in English.

It was also the case that some international students managed to comfortably create workgroups with fellow international friends and acquaintances. However, there were some international students who had no acquaintances and no one with whom to form a workgroup. As a consequence, they felt unwelcome, left-out, and insecure. Clearly, all these scenarios are not conducive to fully reap the benefits of the international classroom, which includes gaining intercultural competences and learning to work in diverse teams.

**Practical solution**

Allow students to choose their own workgroup for a first assignment so as to build a comfort zone, then reshuffle the groups by asking students to form new workgroups for the next project. In doing this, it is important to explain the reason for the change of groups and aid students understand the benefits of working in intercultural diverse teams.
The benefits of intercultural competence are not immediately clear to all

It also became clear that not many Dutch (host) students realise the need to acquire intercultural competences and inclusion to make it a two-way exchange. Their justification is that the international students should be well prepared; since they chose to study in the Netherlands, it is their own responsibility to adapt themselves to the Netherlands. This especially applied to Dutch students who were enrolled on the Dutch ACW track, which runs parallel to ACS. Both tracks share common courses, but the ACW track also has its own profile focused on cultural policy and organisation.

Practical solution

- Give more attention to the host students and create awareness of the benefits of working in internationally diverse teams;
- Extend the workshops on intercultural differences and on how to work in international groups to the students of the Dutch ACW track, as we did in a follow-up, in the subsequent academic year (see p. 27).
Students focus on the final grade

It was also discovered that most students focused on the final grade rather than interaction in workgroups and in the whole course process. When given a group project, they simply distributed tasks in the workgroup and each member worked independently. In the end, one teammate was assigned the task of compiling everything and submitting the assignment.

One task that worked well was in group presentations, where students had to at least discuss and practise the presentation together as a team. We met with each team and discussed the benefits of active teamwork especially with members from diverse backgrounds.

Practical solution

- Give tasks that require active teamwork;
- Meet the workgroups at least once; or alternatively,
- Ask them to submit a brief report on how they cooperated as a workgroup and what they learnt from it.
Students only share experiences after the course

An ongoing challenge is that some students who feel excluded only ask for help too late: close to the task deadline or only when the situation has become quite intolerable. Others struggle to endure it and only share experiences after the end of the course. In our project, some students felt insecure to share experiences openly in their workgroups, to avoid the guilt of accusing others (snitching). Also, some students felt that they did not receive enough support from lecturers and that some lecturers were not involved enough, yet the students would not dare inform the lecturer that they did not feel welcome.

Practical solution

To solve this, we:

- Explained that the information given to us would be used anonymously with the sole aim of helping create a safe workgroup environment;
- Reserved separate individual meetings for these students and gave them tips on how to approach similar situations;
- Encouraged them to approach student advisors for guidance, but some did not want such a record.
Practical solution

According to international students, inclusion should be integral to all aspects of international student life and not only on campus or in the classroom. Some international students feel that they need more integration, for instance in their student houses, student associations, etc. For example, a student reported being told not to cook her home country’s food, as her housemates considered that smelly. In fact, on social media, some student houses advertising for room vacancies often state “No internationals!”

Our observations confirmed that the buddy system became less active when the semester got busy.

To remedy things like these, students pushed to centre the themes of internationalisation, equity and inclusivity in their study association and to have internationalization and the position/inclusion of international students a key focus area within the Faculty Student Council (see “A snowball effect,” p. 48).

Beyond campus, enterprising former international students created Expectalent, a socially innovative company that looks to help internationals connect, integrate, and find access to local opportunities in Nijmegen.
The very fact that you are reading these words means that you are willing to make time and reflect on what you could do to create a more safe and inclusive learning environment for all. We want to thank you for that.

Thank you!

Teachers are busy people

Organising meetings with the staff is challenging especially in the middle of the semester when all are busy. University lecturers have research projects and administrative duties, in addition to a heavy teaching load. As a result, as Parrinton (2020) notes, equity, diversity and inclusion are often still considered to be “nice to have” rather than a priority.

On the contrary, together with many others, we believe a sense of community and of belonging is crucial for students’ well-being and success and that teachers have a crucial role to play in ensuring everyone feels like they belong to the class community; that it is up to them to orchestrate their classes so that they become inclusive and beneficial learning environments that help students acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values they need.
Lessons learnt

Intercultural competence requires effort that is currently not invested amongst domestic (host) students.

Formation of diverse teams in the international classroom is not assured and requires the instructor’s intervention; it should be a requirement to form interculturally inclusive teams for class projects.

To make them more profitable, workgroups should be required to change periodically to enable each student to experience working in new teams.

Teachers should be keen, observant and approachable, in order to enable students feel safe enough to work harmoniously and beneficially.

For lecturers and other stakeholders, managing an international classroom successfully is not automatic but an investment. It takes time and, at least initially, effort.
Unconscious incompetence: A major challenge

One of the main challenges we frequently encounter in society can be termed as “unconscious incompetence”: people who do not know they do not know. On our campus, there are many people who are unaware of their lack of knowledge, skill, or capability in matters of intercultural competence (or cross-cultural capability; for a discussion of the terminology, see Deardorff, 2009). This unconsciousness about one’s incompetence leads to unfortunate situations that are handled contrary to what would be appropriate. For example, a colleague recounts how, as a Dutch student in the US, it was once “suggested” that she make some edits to a paper, and she took the suggestion as optional, not understanding that “I suggest you do this” was a phrase implying it was imperative she do so.

Another situation was when one of our students would never make eye contact with the lecturer, whether during lessons, presentations, or even during the interviews in an oral exam. The teacher concluded that the student was evasive, antisocial, and had poor communication skills. However, in the student’s culture, making eye contact with a high-ranking superior, in this case the professor, is a sign of sheer disrespect.

What should be done

Situations like the ones sketched above happen frequently. They should be handled amicably by first of all recognising the situation in a conscious and competent manner, and then resolving it through conscious effort. This process is a challenge requiring a personal ambition and self-motivation to learn to become (more) interculturally aware, sensitive, competent, and capable. One way to achieve this is to navigate the “four stages of learning” cycle (Figure 1).

The “four stages of learning” model can be used to understand the process of consciously putting effort to achieve intercultural competence, and how to use it to address arising situations, challenges and possible dilemmas.
Four stages of learning

In learning, four phases are often identified:

1. **Unconscious incompetence** is when one is (blissfully) unaware of one’s incompetence: one does not know one lacks the knowledge or skill.

2. **Conscious incompetence** is when one has recognized one’s incompetence or lack of knowledge or skill. This moment of recognition of incompetence is crucial for becoming motivated to learn the new skills and become competent.

3. **Conscious competence** is when one now knows how to do something, but doing so requires conscious effort.

4. **Unconscious competence** is when the skill has become “second nature.” It does not require conscious thinking and effort anymore, but comes naturally.
COVID-19 and the inclusive international classroom

A sudden move to online education

Although online education was not part of our initial project, when COVID-19 forced us to move our classes online, we immediately felt compelled to address the challenges of the inclusive international classroom online. The corona pandemic has especially impacted our international students, as some of them are still new to the Netherlands and were in the process of adapting to the new cultural context and academic expectations and cultivating new social circles and networks. As a matter of fact, even those who had already established social networks were unlikely to have created support bubbles to fall back on in case of emergencies and lockdowns (cf. Tibboel et al. 2020). In the Spring of 2020, international students suddenly found themselves living alone in empty apartments after domestic students withdrew to their parents’ homes; or they moved back to their home countries, finding themselves in different time zones and environments than their teachers and peers, and having to negotiate different cultural dimensions across the virtual spaces of online classrooms and within the setting of their homes.

If creating a safe and inclusive classroom requires special attention and effort as we have argued throughout, then fostering equitable learning experiences for all students in online and hybrid virtual classes is even more complex and should be a priority. In the current crisis, the digital is providing continuity and support for all education, from primary schools to universities. However, online education and virtual classes have also created more inequality and exclusion for vulnerable students due to its heavy reliance on technological and digital access.

At our university, much like everywhere else in the Netherlands and abroad, due to the corona pandemic, online classes were adopted almost instantaneously in a frenzy in the Spring of 2020, amid numerous worries and uncertainties about the COVID-19 virus and its effects and consequences. As we found ourselves teaching online through digital platforms and learning tools, we inquired into the students’ learning, social and emotional needs (cf. Cerna 2020), focusing on questions such as: How do you forge relationships with and between students in virtual classrooms? How do you engage all participants? And how do you establish and maintain a sense of community? (cf. Atwell 2016)
A holistic approach to education in times of crisis

According to Lucie Cerna, analyst in the Directorate for Education and Skills at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “A holistic approach to education – that addresses students’ learning, social and emotional needs – is crucial, especially in times of crisis. Current school closures mean the most vulnerable students are less likely to receive the support and extra services they need, and the gap between vulnerable and other students might widen. Closures can also have considerable effects on students’ sense of belonging to schools and their feelings of self-worth - these are key for inclusion in education.” (Cerna 2020)

Studying at and from home

An important myth to dispel is the assumption that “home” means comfort, safety and equal resources for all. For some, indeed, home is not a safe space. The corona pandemic has caused a surge in domestic violence, with a 30% increase in feminicide and other gender-related violence (cf. Mlambo-Ngcuka 2020). “Home” may also mean lack of, limited, and/or unreliable resources. In the context of the international classroom, this may result in a number of challenges to be considered to ensure equitable learning experiences for all students. These challenges come on top of psychological stress due to the inability of connecting and interacting with academic peers and friends; accountability and loss of independence following from being back home and having to adhere to home rules (which may clash with rules and cultural values governing the classroom); and financial worries, such as loss of jobs or bills that have to be paid.
Students may be located in a different time zone. This means that classes and exams may be scheduled at awkward times for them and deadlines may be different.

**Good practices for inclusive online teaching across time zones:**

- Start from knowledge of where your students are located geographically: ask them in which time zone they are.
- Ideally, schedule classes and exams based on this knowledge.
- Record lectures so they can be watched asynchronically.
- Make strategic use of asynchronous learning tools such as discussion boards or shared documents, which can be done “in one’s own time.”
- Provide clarity for all by being detailed about deadlines. For instance, do not state “the deadline is November 3” but write: “the platform will close on November 3rd at midnight CET.” Alternatively, provide flexible deadlines.

**NB:** Adding the time zone to your deadlines is an inclusive gesture: you indicate you are aware of and sensitive to this difference. There are tools online for time zone conversion or meeting planners helping you find the best time across time zones, e.g., https://www.timeanddate.com/
Study environment

At home, some students may not have a quiet, conducive room for study. International students may face the additional challenge of being in what we could call a different ‘cultural time zone’, meaning they are expected to use opposite cultural dimensions in the same setting, for instance communicating directly in an online class with the teacher and peers, while in their socio-cultural setting at home, such behaviour is seen as rude and one is expected to be less direct and silent. These clashes between cultural dimensions (see pp. 12-13) within a single setting may add to the stress and lack of concentration caused by political instability, red-zone lockdown or infected personal contacts.

Good practices for inclusive teaching online

- Do not require that students turn on their cameras, as they can be invasive; or only do so if a background can be selected. Ask the university to provide such backdrops for use in online classes.

- In online class settings, often join “break-out rooms” and chats to monitor group dynamics; but first, announce you will do so.

“It is conceivable that in an online learning context, students from a high-context culture will expect a certain degree of formality and precise instructions, for example, to search the site for additional resources that the instructor would incorporate into the course content. Inversely, students from a low-context culture would probably adapt more easily to an informal style of online interaction and have no problem exploring several information sources and documents on the Web to supplement course content on their own.” (Rutherford 2008)
In addition to geographical and socio-cultural challenges, some students may also face technical challenges such as slow or unstable internet connection inhibiting virtual class meetings and quizzes, discussion boards, and online exams. Internet access may be very expensive and there may be more or less frequent power outages. Some apps and technology such as Zoom are currently not available in all countries.

**Good practices for inclusive teaching online**

- Be aware of and sensitive to differences in access to ICT.

- Ensure accessibility of resources and materials. Your (international) students may not have been able to carry all their books back home, so consider having e-books available for them to use. Note that Zoom, for instance, is not available in some countries, and that some apps require a stable internet connection, which might not be available or affordable. Also note that some students may use their phones for faster internet connection or because at the time, they have no computer or laptop; and that they are therefore watching your lecture or participating in the class via a small phone screen.

- Allow alternative means of participation, for example allow students to submit their assignments as text in the body of an email message rather than uploading documents or sending email attachments.

- Offer flexible deadlines.

- Encourage peer-to-peer interaction and support, for instance, collective class notes, group discussions and sharing resources on various platforms such as discussion boards, WhatsApp, Google docs, etc.
TIPS FOR TEACHERS:

- Start from understanding and empathy and be kind, supportive and patient.

- Use material from multicultural sources in discussions and assignments to make everyone feel included; but be careful not to stereotype (Banks & Banks, 2010).

- Use inclusive language; that is, language that is “free from words, phrases or tones that reflect discriminatory views of particular types of people or groups.” Barcena et al. (2020) recommend we “avoid offensive, derogatory and judgmental language, and use words and expressions that project respect and empathy, and empower our interlocutor as a worthy individual.”

- The same applies to visuals: use a diverse and inclusive visual language, for instance illustrations, icons, memes and emojis that visually communicate the same welcoming message.

- Where unsure about something: ask the students, for instance by conducting a poll among them to find out what their needs are.
What you can do as a student

TIPS FOR STUDENTS:

- Note that everyone is stressed, thus be empathetic and supportive.
- Be patient, sensitive and generous to others even online; in break-out rooms or chats, start with a welcome/greetings.
- Acknowledge that not everyone has access to a stable internet connection, not even the teacher.
- Acknowledge that not everyone has a computer for personal use; some use phones.
- Acknowledge that some have no electricity to charge appliances.
- Understand when peers cannot attend group meetings online – use alternative fora and apps.
- Share resources such as class notes and scans/photos of material such as slides and library book pages.
A snowball effect

Beyond “First Things First”: student-to-student inclusive internationalisation

“First Things First” was focused on the (physical) classroom and the formal curriculum. However, it soon spilled over to the informal curriculum, as our students picked up on the project and developed it further in spaces beyond the formal classroom, such as the study association. This snowball effect is important to the project’s aim of achieving a safe and inclusive learning environment for all. Here we report from the students’ point of view.

“Nothing About Us Without Us!” This slogan also applies to “First Things First.” Students want to be involved in the process of making their campus and classrooms more inclusive spaces both for themselves and for others. From our project’s perspective, they also need to be involved. Making the international classroom more inclusive is a student-centred project.

Students are at the forefront of creating a sense of belonging. Many (international) students are particularly invested in carving a safe and inclusive space for themselves and the rest of the students that share the space with them currently and those who will in future. It is therefore essential to reach out to students and involve them in the process of making the classroom safer and more inclusive, not only in the classroom but also outside. In our case, this meant engaging with three crucial organizational elements of student life and academic participation: the Study Association KNUS (with its Inclusion Committee), the Programme Committee (Opleidingscommissie - OLC), and the Faculty Student Council (Facultaire Studentenraad - FSRL).

Study Association KNUS & Inclusion Committee

Like all study programmes in the Netherlands, we have a study association. KNUS is the first point of contact between our first-year students and more senior ones. With the arrival, in 2016, of the international ACS bachelor’s programme alongside the Dutch ACW track, KNUS devoted itself to being welcoming of international students and becoming more inclusive. In the wake of “First Things First,” in the academic year 2020-21, the board of KNUS decided to centre their focus on the themes of internationalisation, inclusivity and (social) sustainability.
To seal this resolve, KNUS now also has a special committee: the Inclusion Committee (InCo). This committee aims to make international students feel at home in the Netherlands. Since many ACS students are internationals, the Board finds it important that they feel at home in Nijmegen, at the university and within KNUS, by making sure the international students will feel heard and seen within the association. All the activities organised by the association strive for a better and closer interaction between international and Dutch students, also arranging workshops and events that will help ACS and ACW to come together on a cultural front.

**Potluck dinner**

One of the most successful events of the first semester of the 2020-2021 academic year was the (online) potluck dinner organised by the KNUS Inclusion Committee, called “Fables and Tables.” Students cooked their favourite traditional dish and showed it to the other KNUSsers, sharing with them its history or personal stories related to it. Everyone felt comfortable in sharing their stories, creating a cosy and inclusive atmosphere.

**Buddy system**

To further strengthen the bond between international and domestic students, the Inclusion Committee and the Board of KNUS are currently developing a buddy system. This buddy system consists of pairing up a newbie international student with a (volunteer) senior Dutch ACS or ACW student, who will become a mentor and a friend. Previously, the Faculty already had such a buddy system in place. This student-organised student-to-student buddy system, however, allows the newbie international students to bond with senior students within their programme, thus it will create a strong connection between the different years in the ACS and ACW programme and will continue the Faculty work by familiarizing international students with life in the Netherlands whilst giving equal attention to both Dutch and international members of KNUS. By reaching out to other study associations within the faculty, the InCo aims to share their knowledge and experience regarding internationalisation and extend the work that the committee is doing regarding internationalisation to the entire Faculty of Arts, within which ACS and ACW are located. The goal of this extension is to create contact between the international students in the Faculty of Arts and make them feel comfortable in the new environment.
Programme Committee

The Programme Committee (Opleidingscommissie; OLC) is a formal committee that concerns itself with guaranteeing and improving the quality of the programme. It consists of academic staff and students (half-half) and gives advice to the programme coordinator, the director of education or the dean about all matters concerning the education in the programme. At Radboud University, each programme has its own OLC and at the end of each period (we’re on a quarter system) the Faculty Student Council (FSRL) organises a meeting in which all the student members of the various OLCs meet to discuss various matters regarding changes and innovations in education and quality control of education. Ensuring international representation on the OLC is important. Currently, the student members of our OLC come from different countries and have different backgrounds, which leads them to have a special eye for issues regarding inclusivity and equity. One key issue that arose is that of content warnings, with students petitioning for content warnings on all content that contains potentially distressing material or content that evokes these topics. Content warnings are notices warning the audience of potentially distressing material, for instance mentions of sexual violence, abuse and harassment, (child) violence, self-injury, eating disorders, and mental illnesses. Content warnings are an integral part of the inclusive classroom. They serve to create safe classrooms by enabling students to prepare themselves to adequately engage or, if necessary, disengage with the content by providing them with the possibility to take charge of their own health and learning. As pointed out by the University of Michigan’s Literature, Sciences and the Arts Inclusive Teaching Initiative, content warnings “are not intended to censure instructors nor invite students to avoid material that challenges them.” Instead, they facilitate the creation of a safe and inclusive classroom environment. Here it is important to remember that, as Holley and Steiner (2005) point out: “Safe space does not necessarily refer to an environment without discomfort, struggle, or pain. Being safe is not the same as being comfortable. To grow and learn, students often must confront issues that make them uncomfortable and force them to struggle with who they are and what they believe” (p. 50).
The Faculty of Arts Student Council (FSRL)

The Faculty of Arts Student Council (Facultaire Studentenraad Letteren; FSRL) represents students at the faculty level. Amongst their important functions, they ensure all students’ interests are represented in all educational matters. As a spin-off of the “First Things First,” internationalization and the position/inclusion of international students has become a key focus area within the Faculty Student Council. In the academic year 2020-2021, the portfolio internationalization was introduced, paying special attention to matters of inclusiveness, equity and equal opportunities for all. One way the FSRL devised to facilitate a more inclusive learning environment is by improving their visibility through social media, thus creating a space where students feel comfortable to share with the FSRL issues, ideas and feedback regarding the Faculty of Arts. The FSRL believes education is not one size fits all, and that having a diverse student population that can thrive is beneficial to all students.

“From my function in the Faculty Student Council I decided to come up with a group of international students that can actively look for initiatives and solutions to problems they are facing while studying at Radboud. I think it is important to not just have a space for students to complain, but that they also have room to take matters in their own hands and get the chance to come up with ideas themselves.”

Merel

Councillor Study Associations & PR & Internationalisation 2020-2021
As we complete our “First Things First” project with the writing of this book describing our experiences, we reflect on the steps we took, what worked and what did not, and what is next. Besides sketching our next steps (“A second look at the curriculum,” p. 50) we also issue an invitation to you to join the conversation and play your part in making our education more inclusive.

**Taking care of “First Things First”**

Clearly, we want to continue offering our first-year students training in international collaboration, as this is a key skill for them to be successful at university and in their personal and professional lives. While we started offering such training to the students registered in our international BA programme, we have now extended it to our Dutch programme as well. Given the enthusiasm with which the training was received, we now know we should no longer be reluctant but make all our students aware of cultural differences and develop their sensitivity towards them. What the place of such training in their curriculum ought to be may change. For now, for us it sits well in the mentoring programme, which is a mandatory flanking programme situated on the threshold of the formal and informal curriculum, and as such, it develops skills that are necessary for succeeding at university but for whose development there may not be enough time in the formal curriculum. In the future, we can also see it move to the general introduction of the university, facilitating a campus-wide implementation of the inclusive international classroom.

**Beyond the international/domestic student dichotomy**

Obfuscating commonalities and in-group heterogeneity, the distinction between international and domestic students needs to be subjected to careful scrutiny. While it enables recognition of the specificity of the experiences of first-year students newly arrived from abroad, it is also counterproductive, especially in maintaining a disconnect between internationalisation and the discourse on diversity and inclusion. Thus, in the letter to parliament presenting her National Action Plan for More Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education and Research, the Dutch Minister of Education observes that: “Inequality and unconscious prejudice are still present in the structure, methods and culture of educational and research institutions.” Yet internationalization is nowhere mentioned in the document. From our perspective, focusing on an inclusive international education for all of our students would be more suitable to our increasingly diverse, international/multicultural student population.
“First Things First” was a project designed to take us back to the foundations of the international classroom to ensure its success as a learning environment that inspires innovations by fostering new insights and enabling new collaborations. It was to ensure a safe and inclusive environment as a foundation for an international curriculum. Our next step will now be to have a second look at our curriculum. While the Arts and Culture Studies curriculum was never a mere translation of the Algemene cultuurwetenschappen curriculum in English – it was designed from the start to be more international, meaning to include materials and perspectives from a variety of social/cultural and geographical locations – over the years the need to further internationalise this curriculum becomes increasingly apparent. During our town hall meetings and outside, students have made us realise our course “History of the Arts” was really a “History of the Western Arts.” Inspired by the international Black Lives Matter and anti-racism activist movements, they have voiced their concern that their studies are “focused too much on a male-dominated, white, Western viewpoint,” that they “are being fed non-objective Western narratives that do not apply everywhere in the world,” and that they “need to be taught more black history.” Here, then, the call to decolonize the curriculum and that to internationalise it can be joined into new efforts to better prepare our students for meaningful personal and professional lives in a multicultural and globalizing world.

“This year, the instructors of the Visual Culture course inserted a discussion section on Brightspace where students could suggest films and texts that represented perspectives that they did not cover throughout the course, thus giving an opportunity to everyone to include their own cultural perspective and favouring a diverse conversation.”

Daniela, 3rd year ACS student
Continue the conversation

The title of our project, “First Things First”, indicated we wanted to prioritize, based on the literature, what should be dealt with before other things in the international classroom. “First Things First”, however, is not only about getting our priorities right. It is also the beginning of many more things; a first step towards making our education more inclusive.

Next steps therefore include conversations with many people in many places and at all levels, both on campus and beyond: with our fellow teachers and students, the support staff, and societal and international partners, the city and its inhabitants, etc. About student and faculty well-being, community and belonging, diversity, equity and inclusion, and curriculum, pedagogy, collaborations. Such conversations had started long before the beginning of this Comenius project. We hope you will accept our invitation to join the conversation and set your own steps towards ensuring that our learning communities truly become inclusive learning environments for all.
First Things First: Ensuring a Safe and Inclusive Environment as a Foundation for an International Curriculum

‘First Things First’ prioritizes the creation of a safe and inclusive environment as the very first step to internationalization and the international classroom. Currently, students do not profit fully from the benefits of the international classroom. Domestic and international students do not easily mix and consequently, do not acquire the international competences necessary to be successful in their 21st-century personal and professional lives.

“First Things First” proposes to redevelop Radboud University’s Arts and Culture Studies (ACS) mentoring programme in first year to include international and intercultural competences such as culture shock, adaptation, intercultural awareness, intercultural communication, and working in intercultural groups. This programme will be comprehensively integrated in the formal curriculum as an intervention to instill international competences and create the safe and inclusive learning environment requisite for students to fully benefit from the international classroom. Because the role of the mentors, teaching staff, and student advisors is central to creating a safe and inclusive learning environment, staff training is integral to the project.

To ensure that the project’s benefits are extended to all international programmes at Radboud University, we will a) establish a sounding board to collaborate with teaching staff and student advisors from different programmes and faculties from the start; and b) make an experience book, to distribute across campus and make it available to other interested parties. “First Things First” will also be presented at the University’s annual International Staff Training Week and be shared with colleagues at different faculties and with the Comenius community.

Comenius Teaching Fellow, NRO

May 2019 - October 2020 (18 months).
Extended to January 2021 due to Covid-19.

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