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Developing an Online Collaborative Approach to Global Education in Vocational Contexts

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes work in progress to develop a process for international collaboration between the participants of a vocational teacher education programme in Finland and the Teaching Qualification for Further Education (TQFE) in Scotland. The aim of this work is to engage vocational educators in discussions with international peers, to enhance their understanding of the nature of learners in different contexts and expand opportunities for developing global education competencies. This paper explains the rationale for the collaboration design and outlines a process that is currently under trial. It outlines plans for the evaluation of learners' and tutors' experiences following implementation.

Keywords: vocational education; global education; intercultural competencies; online collaboration.

Introduction

Internationalisation in Finnish higher education has been articulated at national level in a strategy document from the Ministry of Education which includes five primary aims: "Building a genuinely international higher education community, increasing the quality and attractiveness of higher education institutions, promoting the export of expertise, supporting a multicultural society and promoting global responsibility" (Finnish Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 11). In response, Finnish higher education institutions have expanded relevant programmes and support to increase the number of Finnish students travelling abroad as well as the number of international students studying in Finland. In vocational teacher education studies at the higher education level, increasing numbers of courses are now offered in English, and there is a growing focus on competencies for practice in international environments, especially across Europe.

In the Scottish context, the need for intercultural competencies is suggested in the Professional Standards for Lecturers in Scotland's Colleges (Morrison, 2012). These emphasise the need for consideration of social and cultural diversity in aspects of practice, including the planning and facilitation of learning and provision of guidance and support. Lecturers need to enhance or develop intercultural competencies – knowledge, skills and attitudes that allow them to get along with, work and learn with people from diverse cultures (Higher Education Academy, 2014) – in order to support their learners to develop their own skills for working in the global economy.

There have been several major European projects supporting international mobility and collaboration within the vocational sector (e.g. INtheMC, 2012). However, there are specific challenges that need to be overcome when providing opportunities for intercultural collaboration within vocational teacher education programmes. These include the short-term nature of in-service qualifications and differences between programmes offered in different countries.

Vocational education training programmes often require part-time study over nine to twelve months, and participants may simultaneously work full-time. Personal and professional

commitments, and a lack of time or resources, can make taking part in exchange visits logistically difficult. Within individual programmes of study, challenges for international student collaboration are created by variations in national standards, requirements of external accreditation and national education contexts. Differences in academic calendars, course objectives, student expectations and teaching approaches can also make planning collaborative activities across national borders problematic.

In the Australian context, Tran (2013) recognised that vocational teachers often learn 'on the spot' and develop ad hoc practices to support international learners. She suggested that there was a lack of sharing of good practices and a need for more coherent professional development. This short paper presents a structured process developed to enhance understanding of international differences and intercultural competencies within vocational education programmes in Finland and Scotland. The process provided opportunities for professional dialogue and sharing of practice through an online collaborative approach. A brief overview of the two national contexts is provided below, followed by details of the process and some of the issues that arose during implementation.

The vocational education contexts

The teacher qualification programme at the School of Vocational Teacher Education, Oulu University of Applied Sciences, consists of a 60-credit (ECTS) package of vocational pedagogical studies. The programme is usually completed in one year. Students are drawn from a variety of disciplines and undertake their studies in order to be considered eligible for the teacher qualification in Finland. Within this study, a cohort of eight students was engaged in an optional studies course, *Global Education in Vocational Settings* (3 ECTS). This course focused on a definition of global education that included intercultural education, development education, human rights education, peace education and education for sustainable development (Kaivola & Melen-Paaso, 2007).

At the University of Aberdeen, the Teaching Qualification for Further Education (TQFE) is an in-service qualification

for further education lecturers, underpinned by professional standards (Morrison, 2012). Participants engaged in this study were registered on an SCQF level 9 TQFE On-Campus programme and were drawn from four different campuses of two Scottish colleges. The programme is blended in nature, with periodic face-to-face workshops at a college site supported by online resources, asynchronous discussions and real-time online workshops. The cohort of 13 participants included in this study covered a wide range of vocational subject areas and came with a variety of previous educational experiences. During this collaborative process, students were engaged on a compulsory course, *Successful Learners in Further Education*, which explored the needs and characteristics of learners and of participants as learners.

Designing the collaborative approach

The design of the activity emerged from a series of online discussions between the authors, which began with explorations into the nature of the two vocational qualifications. During these discussions, a series of criteria which underpin the design were articulated. These criteria were that the process should:

- work within existing course structures and timetables, and not become a significant additional activity;
- encourage collaborative activity and engagement with examples of authentic practice;
- use appropriate and accessible technology;
- build in opportunities for peer review and reflective dialogue;
- accommodate diversity in participants' backgrounds, subject areas, confidence levels and IT skills.

The resultant design attempts to offer a learner-centred opportunity for reciprocal and reflective activity to support the development of mutual cultural understandings (Hellsten, 2008; Cabezudo et al., 2008). It centres on a four-stage activity which was introduced to participants during a routine workshop session on their own course. The tasks are outlined below.

Task 1: Description of a Scottish teaching context

Scottish participants provided details of their subject and level of study, together with learner characteristics, resources available and other relevant information, using a simple pro forma. To complete the task, they drew on course content and work underway for a formal assignment. The TQFE requires students to engage in independent activity between workshop experiences, and this task was used as an alternative to the existing scheduled activity. The pro forma was made available to students using the Group File Exchange option available in the University of Aberdeen's virtual learning environment (VLE – Blackboard) and was returned by email to the Finnish tutor. A copy of this pro forma is freely available for download from www.slideshare.net/sarahcornelius. Nine class descriptions were provided, covering a range of vocational areas including hairdressing, engineering, hospitality, learning support and the creative arts.

Task 2: Finnish participants design a lesson plan for a Scottish class

Finnish participants designed a lesson plan with a global education theme for each of the identified classes, drawing on content from the *Global Education in Vocational Settings* course. Lesson design was supported by in-class discussions. Five students produced ten lesson plans which were outlined on a second section of the pro forma and returned by email to the Scottish tutor. These were then made available via the Aberdeen VLE to Scottish participants.

Task 3: Scottish participants review the lesson plan and provide feedback

Feedback was provided in response to a further set of questions on the pro forma. Scottish participants were also able to view other lesson plans in the VLE to allow them to see a range of ideas and approaches to global education across different subject areas. Completed pro formas were returned by email to the Finnish tutor and returned to the lesson designers.

Task 4: Scottish and Finnish participants meet for discussion in a real-time online session

Participants were able to meet and discuss the challenges of implementing global education to support successful learning during a University of Aberdeen virtual classroom workshop (using Blackboard Collaborate). This scheduled online workshop conveniently overlapped with an online session scheduled for the Finnish group, thus allowing participants to meet synchronously. This task took Finnish participants into an unfamiliar virtual classroom, therefore time was given for a brief introduction to the software prior to joining with the Scottish students.

During the online session, participants were split into small groups for discussion focusing on a series of questions which were designed to prompt exploration of global education themes. A plenary feedback session was then held, during which participants communicated using both audio and text chat. Follow-up discussions between tutors and their own groups were held after the joint session. These follow-up sessions took place online with the Finnish group and at a later face-to-face session with the Scottish group.

Issues faced during design and implementation

A number of issues had to be considered during the design of the collaborative process, including logistical issues such as timing, shared understandings of context and the need for socialisation and engagement.

One major issue in co-ordinating the two groups was finding an appropriate time for implementation of the process within the two relevant courses, and then fitting the tasks required into pre-existing timetables. This was made easier by similar delivery models which included periodic workshop sessions and a common expectation of independent student activity. Fortunately, both courses had an online workshop timetabled for the same date, creating an overlap which could be used for real-time collaboration. Scheduling activities within the normal course framework facilitated engagement without creating an additional burden for participants. However, timings were still tight, with one week available for each of tasks one, two and three. These co-ordination challenges suggest that design of a similar process for new courses, rather than attempting to retrofit the process into existing course structures, would allow more flexibility.

Other logistical issues included the size of the groups and discipline areas of participants. Whilst it was originally intended to create cross-national pairs to engage in peer review, this was not possible. Instead, Finnish students created multiple lessons, sometimes in subject areas outside their area of expertise, and support for this was provided during a face-to-face group session. Composition of groups for the online discussion also required changes due to unexpected absences. Anticipating some of these problems, the real-time discussions were focused on general themes rather than the specific lesson plans.

Photographs of classroom spaces were provided by some Scottish students as part of the information about their classes. These gave additional insight into the learning context. Some issues arose as

class descriptions were created. For example, local terminology required explanation. Support was provided where necessary; however, additional time given to support a common understanding of the different contexts would facilitate future collaboration.

An emphasis in both programmes on development of practice by engaging with new teaching strategies and approaches, supported by reflective dialogue with peers and tutors, meant that participants were able to engage effectively during the live session, despite limited time for introductions and socialisation. There were, however, a small number of students in each group who were unable to participate in one or more tasks (due to illness or other issues), which impacted on their engagement. Participation could not be made mandatory since the activity was presented as an additional learning opportunity in each course. Strategies to encourage full engagement could be considered with future groups.

Evaluation and impact

An evaluation of the process has begun, but full findings are not available at the time of writing. Evaluation includes a post-course online survey for participants to share feedback on technical and social issues which may have influenced collaboration as well as personal and professional impact. Reflective accounts from tutors will also be analysed to explore the teachers' experience of the process.

Brief, informal feedback from learners was obtained at the end of the live session and this was predominantly positive. It suggested that participants had found the experience to be a valuable way to gain an insight into a different international context. Unexpected outcomes also emerged. For example, one Scottish student was able to implement the Finnish lesson in the time available between receiving the lesson plan and the live discussion, which helped add richness to the discussion. During the live session, common professional responsibilities and interests also emerged, and there was a clear willingness from some participants to continue to work together. To support this, plans are under development to include further

opportunities for collaboration between the two groups during the remainder of their studies.

Conclusions

Effective and authentic collaborative activity is important to support development of intercultural and global education competencies in vocational teacher training programmes. However, designing appropriate international collaborative activities can be problematic due to the differing requirements and constraints of these programmes. Capitalising on opportunities for online interaction within two vocational teacher education programmes in Finland and Scotland, this paper has outlined a process which allowed participants to exchange information about their contexts, collaborate on the design of a lesson and engage in peer review and reflective dialogue. Full evaluation is under way, but initial evidence suggests that participants found the process effective in expanding opportunities to discuss and engage in practice with international peers.

Biographies

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