

# INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

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# **Collaboration to Foster Intercultural Understanding: The International Learning Community Model**

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## **Introduction**

Teacher education institutions and public schools around the world face similar challenges with unfunded mandates: public accountability, evolving standards, increasingly stringent calls for higher performance with fewer resources, growing numbers of students with educational challenges, shrinking teaching forces, and the integration of technology. Suggesting that these forces can combine with changing student populations to form an imperative for change, A.F. Ball (2006) notes, "Globalization, technological advances, and the increasing number of students in classrooms worldwide who are from various racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds make multicultural and multilingual education an imperative in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (p. 1). In 2001, the College of Education at Georgia Southern University partnered with five institutions in the United Kingdom (Cambridge University, University of Derby, University of East London, Sheffield Hallam University and Oxford Brookes University) to establish the International Learning Community (ILC). This paper describes the ILC response to these challenges, with particular attention given to

how student teaching abroad opportunities can be used to foster a deeper understanding of diversity and awareness of intercultural issues. With its location in rural southeast Georgia, Georgia Southern University has long been aware of the need to provide ways for pre-service teachers to broaden their horizons to be better prepared to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse P-12 population in our service area.

### **Internationalizing teacher education**

It isn't difficult to find American educational leaders who see the need for a new focus on internationalization within the teacher education curriculum. As David Imig and Joane McKay (2001) state so eloquently, "[T]here is the need to build global partnerships across national boundaries to address real problems that confront schools and school systems. Building these new connections is a major need and a way for learning organizations to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (p. 10). There is little debate about the general lack of knowledge of American students when it comes to the rest of the world—in terms of basics such as geography, through more complex concepts such as language and culture. As the world shrinks and flattens as a result of economic and technological change, American students risk being left without the skills needed to be productive citizens in a global world (Ball, 2006; Heyl & McCarthy, 2003; Ling, Burman, Cooper, & Ling, 2006). Research (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Heyl & McCarthy, 2003; Quezada, 2004) has shown that few pre-service teachers study a foreign language in college and even fewer participate in any kind of international experience, such as study abroad or student teaching in another country. The problem is not limited to pre-service teachers; in-service teachers and teacher educators

need to participate in experiences that will allow them to infuse multicultural and international experiences into the teacher education curriculum (Ball, 2006; Heyl & McCarthy, 2003; Kelly, 2004; Merryfield, 2000; Merryfield, 2001). In its work with pre- and in-service teachers, the International Learning Community has consciously focused on providing ways to provide international, intercultural experiences. We concur with the idea that “teachers cannot teach what they do not know” (Sanders & Stewart, 2004, p. 204).

The United Kingdom faces many of the same challenges in preparing pre-service and in-service teachers. In 2005 the World Studies Trust published *Supporting the Standards: The Global Dimension in Initial Teacher Education and Training (ITET)*. This document includes a range of recommendations for stakeholders in the U.K. As part of the rationale for reframing the training of teachers to include a focus on internationalization, the Trust identified four areas of added value: motivation and retention, career enhancement, wider horizons, and participation and action (p. 3). These areas are extended into eight key concepts of the global dimension: global citizenship, conflict resolution, diversity, human rights, interdependence, social justice, sustainable development and values and perceptions (p. 4).

In a research project sponsored by a number of professional organizations, including the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE), Ann Schneider (2003) sought to answer the question, “What are the obstacles to increasing the international exposure of prospective teachers?” (p. 5). One critical finding supporting the need for a more active role by colleges of education relates to challenges faced when faculty and administrators work with campus international studies offices. Schneider’s research found a lack of understanding about the roles

and functions of international studies offices on the part of students, faculty, and staff in colleges of education. Interviews with international studies personnel found little knowledge of special factors related to study abroad by education students, such as the need for a network of cooperating teachers and other personnel to establish and oversee internships or student teaching experiences. Other recommendations center around the need to improve student advising and mentoring, reviewing the curriculum to increase focus on study of foreign languages, infusing international concepts in courses both inside and outside a college of education, and addressing challenges related to study abroad as part of the teacher education program of study. Schneider stresses the importance of early planning for education majors interested in an international experience, which requires that communication and collaboration between colleges of education and campus international study offices be efficient and effective.

Quezada (2004) notes that study abroad programs and an internationalized teacher education curriculum may not be the most effective way for pre-service teachers to gain the experiences needed to truly develop international knowledge and perspectives. Quezada states that most students involved in study abroad travel in groups, with a support system that insulates them from culture shock. The relative isolation and immersion of the student teaching experience, and the accompanying "out of place" feeling, is critical in developing deeper understanding of instructional pedagogy, learning about self, and genuine multiculturalism (p. 462). Thus, Quezada suggests that only by student teaching in another country can students "immerse themselves not only with the country but also within the schools and the community" (p. 458).

Considerable research supports the value of actual experiences abroad in developing truly global educators. Cushner and Mahon (2002) studied fifty participants from the Consortium for Overseas Student Teaching. Analysis of responses from an open-ended questionnaire found significant improvements on students' beliefs about themselves and others and increased self-efficacy along with significant gains in global-mindedness and diversity. Research with teacher educators (Merryfield, 2000) found that effective global educators participated in "lived experiences" with individuals whose background and experiences differed significantly from the everyday lives of the teacher educators. Merryfield goes on to note that experiences alone are not enough. The experiences must lead to an on-going examination of self over time and across different cultural perspectives. Schneider (2003) also addresses the need for teacher education faculty development through workshops, travel abroad, and including international and foreign language competence in hiring and promotion.

## **Educational reform in the U.S. and the U.K.**

Schools around the world are implementing various educational reforms. Parliaments, legislatures, and other policy making bodies have mandated a range of school improvement strategies. Although these programs may differ from one another in as many ways as the countries themselves do, they all have a common goal—to improve student learning.

The United Kingdom Parliament has approved a bill that closely mirrors the U.S. *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* legislation. The *Improving the Quality of Education for All (IQEA)* project seeks to improve schools by both changing school culture and placing an emphasis on teaching and learning. *IQEA* attempts to

concentrate change at the often overlooked classroom level (internal conditions), in addition to the school level, simultaneously. Societal changes, the failure of governments to base school policy on a research and/or knowledge base, the need for external and internal accountability agencies, and shared leadership are all additional issues addressed by proponents of policies in the U.S. and the U.K. Unfortunately, educational reform efforts in the United States have not included a significant focus on international education (Kelly, 2004). This means that it is left up to individual teacher training institutions and/or professional organizations to develop effective ways to promote cross-cultural approaches to address common critical issues (Kelly, 2004).

### **The International Learning Community response**

Given these perspectives, and the imperative to attend to critical issues in rural, southeast Georgia, we began a dialog with our international partners that sought to 1) develop an understanding of, and respect for, teacher training models and school reform efforts in other countries; 2) envision teacher quality issues through international lenses; and 3) adopt and/or adapt tried and tested models into pre-service and in-service teacher professional development and teacher education faculty development. The result was the formation of the International Learning Community (ILC).

Both the U.S. and the U.K. spend millions of dollars/pounds on school improvement models. Shared resources and information can improve the efforts of both. Combining school and university resources from multiple sites to focus on applied research results in more efficient and effective models and promotes cross-cultural

understanding and participation in the global society. All ILC members value global education as a way to “prepare young people to understand and interact within a culturally diverse and globally interconnected world” (Merryfield, quoted in Knighten, 2004, ¶4). We believe that international and intercultural education is closely related to teacher effectiveness and student achievement. Ball’s research (2006) in the area of multicultural education supports the assertion and schools that effectively address and infuse multicultural education are more effective in terms of student learning and we believe that international education is a natural extension of multicultural education. Through a variety of ILC initiatives we have addressed common challenges and promoted shared goals. It is important to note from the outset that development of the ILC took place without additional external funding. Committed educators with a shared vision can follow a similar model to establish partnerships to address these and other issues of interest.

The five participating universities and their partner schools in the U.K. and the U.S. began the development of the ILC by identifying common challenges and have developed a shared comprehensive model and plan of action. With the ultimate goal of improving teaching and learning from pre-school through advanced education, the ILC’s goals fall into five broad categories:

- Student/faculty professional development, including the development of intercultural perspectives and understandings;
- Curriculum development/renewal/alignment;
- Shared resources/expertise/curriculum;
- Collaborative research; and
- School improvement initiatives.



To date, our most notable successes have come in terms of student/faculty professional development through exchange programs, shared resources/expertise/curriculum, and school improvement initiatives. Through our ILC involvement, Georgia Southern University has been invited to be a member of iNET, International Networking for Educational Transformation. iNET is an extension of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, a key component of U.K. educational reform. iNET holds conferences in locations around the world (including a conference hosted by Georgia Southern in 2006) to address school reform issues. The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust supports international efforts through the TIPD (Teachers' International Professional Development) Programme. Areas of focus for TIPD exchanges include raising standards, inclusion of special needs students, vocational education, turning around schools in challenging circumstances, effective use of technology, citizenship and civic education, and behavior management. The ILC mirrors the goals of the TIPD Programme since TIPD exchanges are limited to teachers in EU countries.

Initiatives related to student and faculty exchange have also begun under the auspices of the ILC. As discussed below, there are many challenges related to state rules regarding student teaching requirements, supervision and mentoring of student teachers, and funding for student teachers. All of the ILC partners continue to explore creative ways to address these challenges to increase opportunities for student and faculty exchanges. As Quezada (2004), Merryfield (2000, 2001), and others report, there is no substitute for actually spending time in another country/culture. Short-term faculty study tours, including school and university visits, have taken place in Georgia and the U.K. Special events such as the International Arts Academy, held in

Statesboro in summer, 2006, have provided opportunities for K-12 student interaction. Georgia Southern has also displayed art work from U.K. students. Initial work is taking place to develop networks of researchers, with the ultimate goal of extending research opportunities to teacher educators seeking advanced degrees.

### **International student teaching**

Twenty-one student teachers from Georgia Southern University have completed a portion of their student teaching in the U.K. since 2003 (ten early childhood majors, five special education majors, three middle grades majors, and four secondary education majors). As part of the debriefing from their experiences, students were asked to reflect not only on commonalities and differences in instruction, but also on their intercultural understandings. One student noted, "I will take knowing that all children are the same no matter where you go," a sentiment echoed by another student who stated that "I found that kids are kids no matter where they live or what language they speak. Teachers also have the same understanding and compassion for their students."

As faculty and staff from Georgia Southern have reviewed outcomes from sending student teachers to the U.K., we have attempted to provide our students with more opportunities to engage in critical reflection about their experiences. As a result, the six student teachers going to the U.K. in Spring, 2007 will be required to develop a portfolio including elements related to the four commitments in the College's conceptual framework. These include commitments to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of the profession, to diversity, to technology and to the practice of

continuous reflection and assessments. Artifacts and reflections related to diversity include approaches to working with special needs students, analysis of school diversity, reflection of teacher responses to diversity, and an examination of relevant standards in practice. We believe that creation of the portfolio will be instrumental in ensuring that the student teaching experience in the U.K. results in changed attitudes and new understandings of intercultural issues and the importance of global education.

### **Challenges and future directions**

Initiatives such as the ILC can only go so far without additional funding and resources. Given the weakness of the U.S. dollar right now in the U.K., it has been a significant challenge to support student teachers who want to have an international experience. None of the ILC partners have access to free housing for student teachers, which also adds to the cost. Funding sources are also needed to support faculty exchanges and collaborative research.

Attitudinal challenges cannot be overlooked. Georgia Southern University is located in a conservative, rural area and not all of our constituents see the value of global education experiences or even an internationalized teacher education curriculum. Kelly (2004) notes that the emphasis on preparing teachers to work within the local community can also be a function of the kinds of institutions where many teacher preparation programs exist. Often only large research institutions have the resources to offer a wide range of areas studies programs. Area studies programs typically reach across campus colleges and departments, including faculty with specializations in related languages, history, anthropology, and literature. While area

studies programs may exist apart from colleges of education, they can serve as a rich set of resources and contacts. Some faculty feel that there isn't any place in the curriculum for "new" content and we have found it challenging to engage them in a dialog about needed changes in curriculum and experiences (Bales, 2004; Heyl & McCarthy, 2003). Following the most recent terrorist attacks in London, two of our prospective student teachers decided they weren't comfortable with traveling and working abroad.

As noted above, state department of education and university rules make it a challenge to facilitate student teacher placements abroad. There are similar challenges for U.K. institutions who want to place student teachers in the U.S. We have found ways to work around these issues, but it takes time and energy to follow through.

As with many reform initiatives, continuity is an on-going challenge. The ILC began with a cohort of individuals (primarily university level teacher education faculty and administrators) who were deeply committed to developing a meaningful network addressing educational reform and student learning "across the pond." As individuals take on new jobs, retire, or move on to other tasks, it is critical to build an organization that isn't dependent on personalities. This is particularly important as the ILC works to increase the participation of our public school partners. We face challenges in communicating the benefits of ILC participation to a constantly changing group of teachers and administrators in our local public schools, which has major implications when it comes to planning productive exchanges of students and faculty. Fortunately, technology offers many opportunities to facilitate communication and disseminate information among ILC partners. We have already used video conferencing to conduct ILC meetings

and plan to investigate other interactive technologies such as blogs as a way to increase communication.

Developing new degree programs and certificates is an area of interest to all ILC partners. With the addition of institutions from China to the partnership, we hope to be able to offer a doctoral degree that would allow students to study one summer in China, one summer in the U.K., and one summer in the U.S. While this degree is still very much in the discussion phase, we have begun planning for a graduate course and student exchange built on writing across the curriculum initiatives underway in participating countries.

As we have shared the benefits of ILC participation with other institutions, we hope to expand ILC membership. Adding a Chinese institution to the ILC builds on a Memorandum of Understanding in place at Georgia Southern University. With the growing importance of China and other Asian countries in the world economy and in world events, this partnership seems particularly critical. Expansion brings new challenges, but challenges keep the ILC a vital, growing learning community.

### **Implications**

The challenges the ILC at Georgia Southern University has experienced are those typically found when developing an international initiative in a context in which internationalization of curriculum is a relatively new idea. These include lack of funding and infrastructure support, minimal faculty understanding of and dispositions toward international study curriculum, and curricular constraints between countries. These challenges suggest the following implications for the successful development and maintenance of any program such as our ILC:

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- Institutional ILC funding support structure (through university and grant funding);
- Faculty dispositions toward international study (through inservice education and experience) ;
- International school and university curriculum map for ease of exchange (through ILC project);
- Institutionalization of the ILC concept (through integration into the curriculum); and
- Increased use of technology for ILC meetings and international course/program offerings (through school and university support at all ILC sites).

### Conclusion

In its brief history, the ILC has experienced both the benefits and challenges of internationalizing our educator preparation curriculum. Through candidate and faculty exchanges, we have gained deeper understandings of the U.K. culture, its educational system, and its effective educational strategies aimed at meeting the learning needs of all learners. In addressing their field-based research questions about our educational system and culture, we have gained better insight into our own education system – its assumptions about diversity and the resulting effective/ineffective educational practices. We clearly see opportunities for expanding the ILC's activities more broadly in the U.K. and to other countries such as China. It is, however, important to first develop a strong foundation which will support the current and future development of the ILC.

## Resources

Improving the Quality of Education for All

<http://www.iqea.com/>

The International Learning Community

<http://coe.georgiasouthern.edu/ilc/index.html>

iNET (International Networking for Educational Transformation)

<http://www.sst-inet.net/>

Specialist Schools and Academies Trust

<http://www.specialistschools.org.uk/>

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