# Reflections on International Exchange: Developing A Collaborative Curriculum Model

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**Abstract:** Ideally, international teacher exchanges would fully utilize a visiting lecturer's expertise and cultural background to broaden student perspectives. However, certain limitations related to programme and curricular structures as well as student expectations and goals may hamper this opportunity. A Fulbright visiting lecturer and host country faculty member reflect on the constraints and opportunities encountered when co-teaching a course. Implications of this case study focus on ways in which seemingly restrictive curricular parameters may be modified.

**Key words:** international exchange, curriculum, multicultural education, teacher and student expectations, co-teaching, collaboration

## 1. Introduction

An international teaching exchange is, indeed, an invaluable learning opportunity; in the case of a Fulbright fellowship, mid-career and senior professionals from developing countries who aspire to it regard it very highly. They are aware of the developments in their subject to a large extent and they would like to learn further so they will continue to be relevant. They are equally eager to know if they will measure up to their own expectations as professionals. Therefore, the applicants for a Fulbright teaching fellowship are ambitious, confident, and nervous. Adequate preparation, which makes varied demands, is necessary if the aspirant wants to learn from the experience and contribute the best to the host university.

Similar factors apply to those presented with an opportunity to teach or pursue research opportunities in another country; interact with new educational systems, teaching and learning approaches, and curricula; and collaborate with their host country counterparts. International scholarly exchange continues to increase. In 2011/2012, the world total for international scholars represented 116,917 individuals, a 1.4% increase from the previous year (Institute of International Education, 2012). The Fulbright Scholar programme itself sponsors 800 educational professionals from the United States to 155 different countries to pursue scholarship, teaching, and educational opportunities, and invites another 800 faculty members from across the world to the United States

(Council for International Exchange of Scholars, 2013). The goal of such exchanges is expanding horizons and perspectives on multiple levels.

Once in the host country, the awardee or visiting teacher is challenged both physically and emotionally. In addition to the obvious challenges of acclimatization to food, housing, climate, transportation, and new colleagues, the teaching context presents challenges and opportunities, some of which may be unanticipated. These relate to four components of the teaching context: curriculum, visitor's background knowledge of the local situation, visitor's awareness of the student's background knowledge, and the willingness of the visitor and students to take pedagogical risk. All of these issues are situated within the educational or academic culture of the host institution as well as the broader regional culture. These elements affect teacher and learner expectations and learning outcomes. This article explores curricular issues related to constraints that may present themselves in international educational exchange contexts. The case study presented is a co-teaching situation in which a visiting lecturer and host country faculty member collaborated on a course. The study has implications for curriculum issues in general.

## 2. Context for the Exchange

The Fulbright lecturer in this case study selected the host university primarily due to the opportunity to co-teach a course. She was also intrigued by the fact that the host faculty member indicated much homogeneity in the student population and in the region as a whole. Although cultural and ethnic diversity is growing, current demographic statistics indicate that approximately 17% of the population is ethnically diverse compared to 34% nation-wide (Perlich, 2009). The former number is expected to increase to 30% by 2050 while the latter is projected to be 54% (Perlich, 2009). This growth in diversity will have a significant impact on primary and secondary schools and presents a pressing need for teachers to be trained in English as a Second Language (ESL) pedagogies and multicultural issues. The master of education programme (MEd), in which the lecturer and host faculty member taught, is one of three master's degree programmes at the institution, which received university status in 2008. The institution has no doctoral programmes. It is a large, open access, regional institution and its primary mission is on teaching rather than research. Thus, even the master's degree programmes tend to have a practical, application-based approach founded in theory.

## 3. Curriculum Development: Constraints and Opportunities

Ideally the co-teachers, in this case, the Fulbright lecturer and the host country faculty member, would work together in designing the curriculum for the course. This might occur several months prior to the lecturer arriving on campus. In the current case, the host faculty member sent catalog descriptions of possible courses and syllabi to the lecturer and conversations ensued about which course would be the most appropriate to the lecturer's background. These conversations informed the specific goals and proposed outcomes that the lecturer submitted as part of the part of the Fulbright application process.

Initially, a multicultural education course was identified; however, this course was not available during the semester of the Fulbright award. In its stead, the lecturer and faculty member were given the opportunity to teach a programme evaluation course with the idea that it could focus on evaluating the multicultural aspects of educational contexts such as the classroom environment, curriculum, pedagogy, teachers, school administration, school setting, and other factors to determine the extent to which these reflected multiple perspectives and

accommodated diverse students (Day, 1999). In this way, the lecturer's unique perspectives could contribute to the course. Prior to the lecturer's arrival, the lecturer and host faculty member conferred on possible content and topics for the course.

The constraints of physical distance between the co-teachers in the planning stage, and being assigned to a course that did not obviously lend itself to issues of linguistics and multiculturalism, presented challenges that required adjustment. Indeed, a variety of barriers may be present in cross-cultural teaching situations. The visiting lecturer and the students may lack shared knowledge. Curricular structures may be limiting due to required standards, the goals of the educational programme, and established course objectives. The teaching situation is also affected by cultural issues, which impact pedagogical approaches, teacher and student expectations, classroom interactions, the syllabus, and course assignments. Many of these elements were evident in the case study under discussion.

In spite of this, opportunities can be realized. These include co-learning among the teachers and trainees, which can address gaps in shared knowledge and cultural understanding as the host faculty member, visiting lecturer, and the teacher trainees negotiate learning. Similarly, adjustments can be made to the curriculum as the two faculty members work with trainees to move them beyond the local context to a broader international perspective, yet support required learning goals. The success of this endeavor depends on the willingness of all involved to take pedagogical risks, collaborate, and find a developmental platform through which transformation for all can occur. Figure 1 indicates major elements that impact the teaching and learning experience in cross-cultural contexts and potential opportunities.
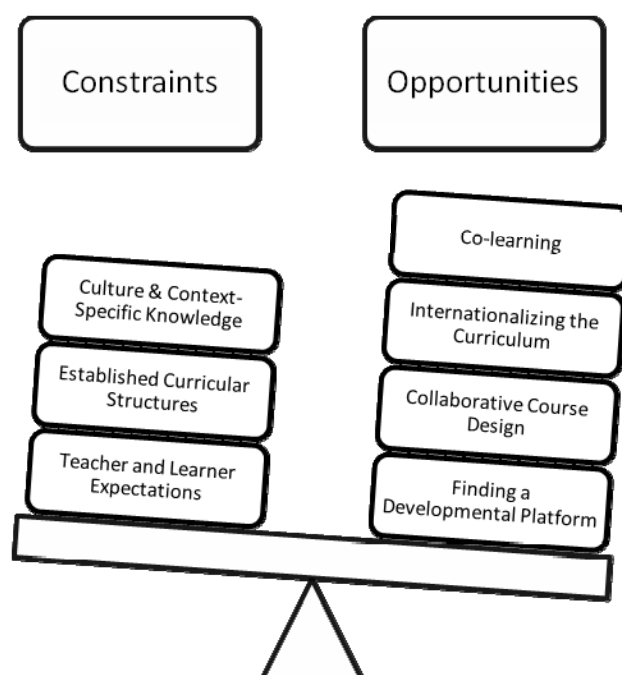


**Figure 1 Constraints and Opportunities in Cross-Cultural Educational Exchanges**

## 4. Curricular Frameworks

Curriculum models in language teaching and higher education share commonalities (e.g., Graves, 2009;

Hicks, 2007; Karseth, 2006; Richards, 2001). In essence, curriculum involves "*who* will be taught, *what* will be taught, *how* it will be taught, and *how* what is learned will be evaluated" (Graves, 2009, p. 115). Other considerations may include when, where, and why related to the learner and learning context (Hicks, 2007). Curriculum has also been represented as involving structure, content, pedagogy, and aims (Karseth, 2006). Curriculum typically involves a situation analysis (Richards, 2001), or consideration of the external and internal factors present in the environment for which the curriculum is designed. Models differ with some variation of components, but share key elements.

Curriculum may refer to an entire educational programme or a specific course (Graves, 2009). Curricular development and implementation does not follow a linear, predictable pattern (Richards, 1996) due to the variety of situational variables that may be present. Thus, frameworks for course design that can be adapted to address specific issues and decision-making needs are particularly beneficial to teachers (Graves, 2009). Additionally, case studies that demonstrate processes for considering challenges, collecting information, examining theory, and utilizing experience are advantageous in helping others determine how to identify and apply strategies for curriculum or syllabus development in their own contexts (Richards, 2001).

Curricular planning involves an individual teacher's values, experience, beliefs, and knowledge, and is influenced by interactions with other teachers and students in particular teaching contexts (Graves, 2009; Richards, 2001). These factors are highly relevant in international teaching exchange situations. Kumaravadivelu's (2001) concept of a *pedagogy of particularity* focuses on these types of factors. It considers context and emphasizes that the curriculum must be reflective of a particular group of teachers, learners, and goals within both the institutional and sociocultural context. Particularity involves consideration of local contexts and lived experiences rather than generic knowledge obtained from teacher training courses. Finding a balance in managing what the teachers needed for their own context and maximizing the benefits of international teacher exchange was a relevant issue in this case study. At times, the pedagogy of particularity interfered with the goal to broaden the curriculum.

We next examine curricular factors in the co-teaching experience that affected the degree to which the course could benefit from the international expertise of the Fulbright lecturer. The lessons learned demonstrate the need for flexibility and collaboration among invested parties, and the importance of sharing insights into a variety of teaching contexts in order to identify strategies for curricular problem-solving and redesign.

## 5. Local Educational Context

The MEd programme in which the Fulbright lecturer and host country faculty member co-taught consisted of three areas of specialty from which trainees could choose: curriculum and instruction, ESL, or mathematics. The programme is based on a cohort model with a group of about 20 practicing teachers admitted each year. These teacher trainees enroll in courses together over a period of two years, in which time they can earn their degree. The students take one course scheduled in the evening during the school year, and two courses each summer. Due to the cohort model, the students develop close relationships. They know each other's strengths and weaknesses and have shared learning experiences. Typically, they support each other and look forward to gathering for class. In some respects, the teacher who enters this situation is at a disadvantage, feeling like an outsider. Both the host country faculty member and the visiting lecturer experienced this to some extent.

The MEd programme was specifically designed with the demographics of a particular target group in mind — practicing K-12 teachers in the region. The development pattern for the initial curriculum was based on a needs

analysis that included what the teachers knew and could do at the start of the educational programme and what they would need to know and be able to do in their current teaching contexts in the region (e.g., Graves, 2009). However, teachers also needed to prepare for demographic changes in the region, as mentioned earlier, thus future needs in terms of the ability to understand and support diverse learners was important.

### 5.1 Goals and Learning Outcomes

Although the objectives for the course were already established, they had been developed when the master's programme had been proposed, four years prior to the co-teaching experience, and before the course had actually been taught. Thus, instructors who taught the course had the autonomy to modify them providing the revised objectives supported the overall intent of the course. The course level learning outcomes were as follows:

- Examine and construct a variety of assessment tools.
- Interpret scores from a variety of assessments.
- Use assessment information to evaluate the efficacy of district and school programmes and instruction.
- Use assessment data to plan instruction.
- Evaluate published assessments.

These goals as stated did not lend themselves to the types of opportunities depicted in Figure 1; as such, the curriculum needed to evolve.

### 5.2 Culture and Context-specific Knowledge: Internationalizing the Curriculum

While the changing demographics in the region appeared to be an excellent opportunity to expand the teachers' perspectives about teaching and learning, the pedagogy of particularity (Kumaravadivelu, 2001) in terms of a focus on local and immediate contexts and needs was evident in the trainees' goals and expectations. Thus, culture and context-specific knowledge was a primary constraint in the teaching context and conflicted with the intent of the co-teachers to design a course rich in cultural exchange.

One of the most important points of reference for any course, and more so an applied one, is the shared knowledge of the teacher and student. Often, learning is influenced by the learners' prior knowledge, and their attitudes to this knowledge: the inclusion or exclusion of this awareness influences a teacher's instructional strategies.

Especially, in a teacher education course, the trainer usually has a thorough understanding of not only the background knowledge of the teacher trainees but also that of the components of their teaching contexts. He or she also knows what the trainees have studied before they joined the course, and these include syllabus, methods, assessment procedures, policies, and curriculum frameworks. There is also the strong likelihood of the trainer having gone through a similar schooling system and experienced practices that are a common inheritance. So, it is not unreasonable to assume that the trainer and the trainee are aware of the common concerns as well. In other words, the home university creates a platform where they both work with the help of their shared knowledge as a point of reference, and try to build on it. At every stage of the teaching learning process, this shared common awareness allows the trainer and the trainee to contribute meaningfully to the process of learning. The awareness is considered a given and used both unconsciously and consciously. Bagnole and Anderson (1995) highlight the importance of such awareness in their study of client centeredness in ELT training in a similar situation.

In contrast, the context-specific knowledge of the students at the host university is different from that of the visiting lecturer who may have very little familiarity of the context. More so, in a master's course on education where all the students are in-service teachers, the visiting lecturer may need specifics. Problems get compounded

if there is homogeneity and all the student-teachers work in the same district or state. This may even put both the parties at a disadvantage. First, the absence of differences in their situations encouraged the students to readily agree with each other and preempted the possibility of stimulating comparisons. Given the sharp focus of the course and the constraints of time, the visitor had very little scope for introducing anything which was not directly relevant to the trainee's situation.

Secondly, the class had every reason to remain in their zone of familiarity. It must be mentioned that the end-of the course evaluation showed that none of the students tried to find out any information regarding the school situation in the visitor's country. This was not surprising as they chose to evaluate situations they knew only too well and the course was too region-specific to encourage them to examine school situations elsewhere in the country. They were uncomfortable with any content and discussion that did not focus directly on their school situation. They lacked motivation to study anything new or possibly different. Within the objectives of the course and the context of their selective attention, the visitor had little opportunity to encourage them to move out of their comfort zone.

The situation may be best understood in comparison with the possibilities at the home university. The faculty member would have an in-depth understanding of the background knowledge and the career goals of students and this would have created innumerable occasions to wean the trainees away from selective attention, guide them through unfamiliar contexts and thus create a more challenging scenario and facilitate a wider perspective.

### 5.3 Curricular Structures: Collaborative Course Design

Given the competencies of the trainees as reflected in their classroom discussions, reflection papers and other assignments, it was evident the course could be more ambitious. One of the ways in which this may be done is to take the trainees into confidence and evolve a curriculum that would draw on the culture and context-specific knowledge of the visitor and the trainees both. This will create the foundation for the course, help them evolve the goals, and agree on the content and the methods of processing it. Interactions like this are likely to result in the emergence of international perspectives on the subject in question.

It is commonly known that the nature of the components of an educational programme such as the curriculum, learning goals, assessment, classroom practices, the roles of a teacher and a student, and materials differ from one institution to the other. Also, most decisions related to an educational programme are made by teachers, as found by Weimer (2002), who examined learning situations to determine the balance of control between teachers and learners. It may not be an exaggeration to say that such factors are most often determined by conventions. For example, the host university, in question, gave the student a detailed plan of the curriculum, materials, and assessment before the beginning of the course. Given the context, making or recommending changes of any kind, especially when they relate to the widening of the scope of the course, will demand several modifications which may not be agreeable to all. Students can be impatient with or indifferent to additions, and in-service teacher-students may resist change more than anyone else; more so, when they have been through two semesters already. They begin to be comfortable with the direction of the course and the expectations of the faculty.

Equally important is to note that a semester is too short to allow the visitor time to adjust to the situation, let alone make modifications after the course details are announced. When students begin to think that the curriculum meets with their immediate professional needs, the visitor will not be able to suggest changes that may demand a totally different approach from what has been followed so far. For example, when students are used to evaluating

programmes at the school level, they may not readily agree to evaluate educational programmes in higher education. Students will need time to appreciate any changes in the course which accompany changes in the expectations of the faculty, and hence changes in the nature of student work.

In other words, although a visiting lecturer might feel responsible to bring in modifications, it may not be possible to effect them for quite a few reasons. Primarily, a course is conceptualized as a part of a programme and especially, when it is offered in the middle of a programme like the course in question which is offered in the third semester of a two year programme. Secondly, the class's perception of the goals of a programme is already determined when they reach the third semester. Especially for a stranger, it would need a good deal of time to guide them to understand the relevance of something which is not mentioned in the curriculum, and encourage them to connect it to their own contexts. Neither of them can be done without their consent and willingness to be open-minded.

Therefore, the host department may adopt a flexible, procedural approach to the drafting of the course and arrange for a week-long interaction and discussions among their faculty, visiting scholar, and the students. The week may be considered as part of the course as it would be spent in academic pursuit as they consider various options and arrive at an understanding of the goals and expectations. While evolving the syllabus, the visiting faculty member and the students will have opportunities to understand each other as human beings and academics. Without this understanding, an academic programme will have limited success. In the context of designing courses in law, Hess observes that "syllabus construction with students helps the teacher set a tone for the course of mutual respect, commitment, engagement, and collaboration" (2008, p. 387). This, in turn, will build trust between them and enhance the quality of their interaction.

### 5.4 Teacher and Learner Expectations: Finding A Developmental Platform

More often than not, there are differences in the expectations of a teacher and the class in the context of the aims, prescribed reading, evaluation procedures, and instructional strategies. While young students depend on their parents to negotiate with the teacher, adult learners try to resolve the issues themselves at the university level. In any case, when they share context-specific knowledge and culture, they are likely to arrive at an understanding soon.

A visiting context is more complex as it involves differences in personalities and academic approaches. There may be institutional bottlenecks also. Context-specific knowledge, as mentioned earlier, plays a crucial role in determining an individual's expectations, and the goals of the academic programme. Given the situation, it is essential that the visiting faculty member and the students discuss their expectations with regards to the course and identify common concerns before beginning the course itself.

Ideally, an international award like the Fulbright visiting lecturership brings two very different worlds together, the host's and the visitor's, in an effort to develop not a few individuals but societies. In order to achieve this aim, a developmental platform has to be created. This is possible only with the cooperation of the individuals and institutions concerned.

Most often, the visit is perceived only as a teaching opportunity for the awardee. In fact, it is a critical learning opportunity for everyone engaged, directly and indirectly, in the interaction: visiting faculty, host institution, and the students. Each one of them is likely to acquire fresh perspectives on not only the subject and pedagogy but also themselves. The participants will become consciously aware of the need for a critical, reflective outlook only when they are encouraged to articulate their expectations. The process, if begun early, will motivate

Bain's (2012) deep learners who engage with concepts and work towards transformation, to contribute richly and meaningfully towards building a long-term learning network.

In sum, a flexible curriculum development framework must be adopted, and the course evolved together by the host department, visiting faculty and the students in order to realize the full potential inherent to a visiting context.

## 6. Implications and Conclusions

This case study demonstrates the complexity of international educational exchange in terms of curricular structures and their inherent constraints. While the co-teaching experience was a positive one, and the students thoroughly enjoyed the contributions of the visiting scholar, the focus on the local, educational context, the trainees' expectations, and the lack of shared educational background were challenges that limited the learning outcomes. Although the course structure, assignments, materials, and evaluation practices were reflective of the goals of the programme and the students, and recognized both the institutional and sociocultural contexts, they conflicted with the aims of the host country faculty member and visiting scholar to broaden and deepen the learning experience. Thus, a more collaborative approach upfront characterized by collective course-building and syllabus development among the teachers and teacher trainees is strongly recommended to negotiate goals and expectations and realize a common understanding.

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