

‘Cultural Academy’: a new approach to multicultural learning at the University of Surrey

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Introduction

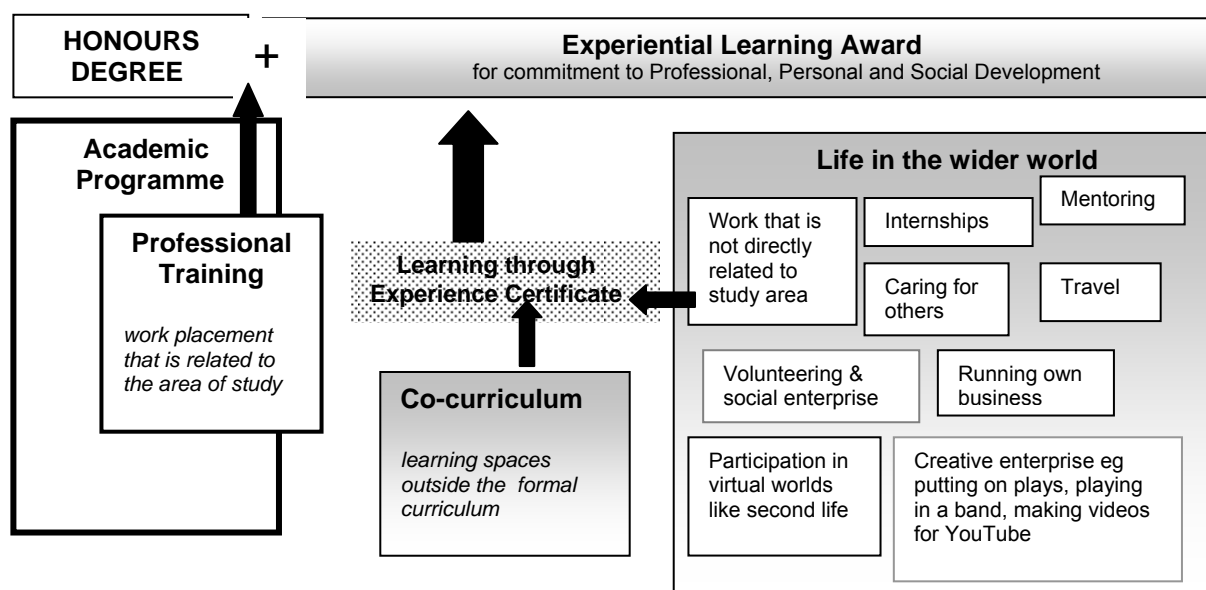
Cultural diversity is one of the things that makes this world a very complicated place and we cannot claim that we educate people for a lifetime of working and learning without engaging with the issue of how we prepare them, or how they prepare themselves, for the cultural worlds they will occupy.

But in the UK cultural diversity is a fact of university life. For example, at the University of Surrey nearly 30% of our students originate from over 130 different countries. Surrey is ranked 42nd and 49th worldwide for its proportion of international staff and students respectively in *the THES - QS World University Rankings 2007* a list of the top 540 universities and colleges selected from an estimated 10,000 institutions worldwide. But what are we doing that is different to any other university to optimize the value of this distinctive population profile?

We believe that a higher education that aspires to preparing students for the cultural complexities they will encounter in their professional and personal lives must provide opportunity for learning through experiences of interacting and communicating with other cultures. Implicitly the Surrey experience does this but primarily through students’ own social interactions. SCEPTRe wanted to make this a more explicit part of students’ educational experiences.

The concept of a ‘Cultural Academy’ was born from this concern and a belief that we could do more to learn from the cultural diversity within our own campus society. But in a curriculum world dominated by disciplinary interests and no tradition of liberal arts options there is little scope for cultural education within the academic curriculum. Our attention was drawn to the possibility afforded by the co-curriculum – opportunities for learning that are organized and designed by an institution in the space outside the formal academic curriculum. At Surrey we are developing the concept of a Life-wide Curriculum (Jackson, 2008 and Figure 1) to embrace the full range of experiences that are valid in a learner’s higher education profile and to change our conception of what counts as learning. Learning in the wider world is recognized through a Learning through Experience Certificate and in time we are in the process of designing an overarching Experiential Learning Award to recognize all the experiential learning gained while studying.

Figure 1 The Life-Wide Curriculum / Experiential Learning Award concept being developed at the University of Surrey. Cultural Academy occupies a co-curriculum space. Experiential learning outside the academic curriculum is recognized through the Learning through Experience Certificate.



Cultural Academy adopted an appreciative stance to promoting enquiry into the cultural heritage and diversity of participants lives. This appreciative stance was an important way in which trusting relationships were developed amongst participants: a necessary pre-requisite for sharing experiences.

Through a series of workshops, planning meetings and a student-led conference, participants (students, facilitators and mentors) shared their experiences and understandings of culture and its influences on their lives. An important underlying principle of Cultural Academy is that it seeks to foster a community of enquirers – academic staff facilitators, students and film makers are all partners in the learning enterprise and to reflect this, this paper has been written by the staff facilitation team with some of the student participants and the film makers.

Origin of Cultural Academy

The idea of Cultural Academy grew from an increasing awareness of the role of culture in learning as SCEPTrE developing its core educational concepts of *learning for a complex world* and *life-wide curriculum*. Cultural diversity and deficiencies in our understanding of how to communicate across cultures, or appreciate world views from other cultural perspectives, undoubtedly contributes to the complexity of the world we live in. Cultural Academy was born from the dual beliefs that we needed to explore this dimension of complexity and a concern to improve students' experiences by creating opportunity for them to explore the idea and effects of culture. The implicit political motive which grew during the process was to encourage the university to think more deeply about itself as a multicultural society.

Through its role as a broker SCEPTrE brought together two people (VV and NH) who had expressed an interest in multi-cultural education and who had experience of teaching cultural awareness in the health related disciplines, to invent and facilitate Cultural Academy. The planning phase sought to involve many people from many different parts of the university who had also declared an interest in cultural education.

Goals and Design

We wanted to create a process that would not be too onerous on students in terms of their time commitment but which would sustain interest and involvement and permit relationship development over several months. We chose a design that involved participation in three workshops, a planning meeting and an end of process student-led conference. We intended that students would continue to work together in small groups between the workshops, but this did not happen until the conference planning stages of the experience. An overview of the process is shown schematically in Figure 2.

About twenty students were sought for the pilot: recruitment began at the 'Freshers Fayre'. An email invitation was sent out on the all student mail list and twenty seven students completed an application form: each explained why they wanted to join Cultural Academy.

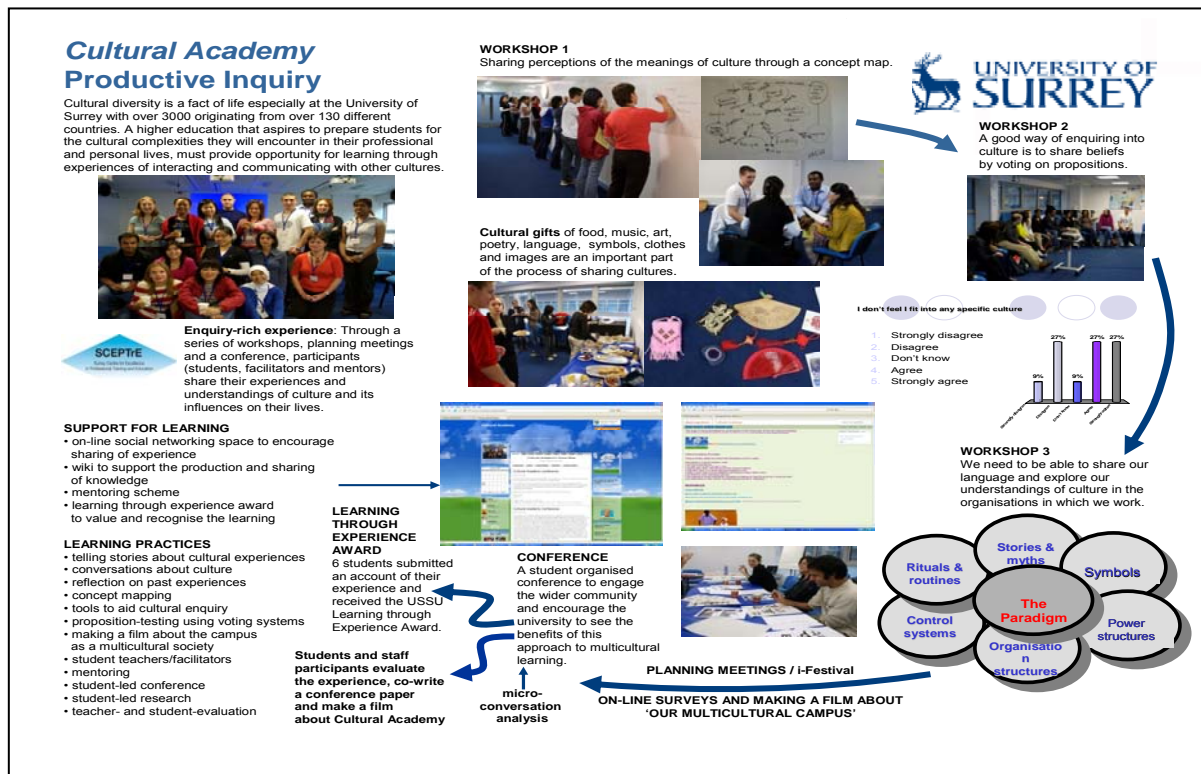
Reasons given for wanting to be part of Cultural Academy include:

- Exposure to and learning about other cultures
- Working more effectively with other cultures
- Relevance to my academic programme
- To learn more about intercultural communication
- To help me to be a better professional
- To help me be a better person / learn about myself
- Networking and friendship
- I just want to be part of it

Intending participants were also invited to tell a short story of a situation that they had experienced requiring them to be aware of and be sensitive to other cultures. The stories were synthesized and anonymised and put onto a Cultural Academy wiki as a knowledge asset ahead of the first workshop. This was to show participants that the process was underpinned by story telling and the sharing of personal experiences and that they could grow useful knowledge quickly by pooling their experiences.

All 27 students were invited to join the Academy and eighteen students turned up to the first workshop. Prior to the workshop we invited participants to think about what culture meant to them: to bring a cultural gift and to complete learner agreement to enable them to gain recognition for their involvement and learning through a new Learning through Experience Award.

Figure 2 A summary of the process and a glimpse of the activities



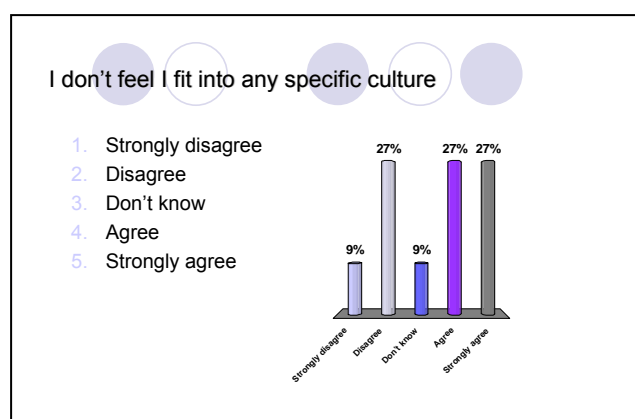
Workshops

The workshops provided opportunity for small group and whole group conversation and discussion. Presentation was kept to a minimum and the members of staff acted as facilitators.

During the first workshop participants set the 'ground rules' prompted by the question 'what sort of culture do we want for Cultural Academy?' The rules that emerged are good for any collaborative working and learning process and they were respected throughout the process. We used concept maps to reveal participants initial understandings of the meanings of culture and some simple tools to foster personal and group enquiry into cultural identities 'who am I?' and 'What's in a name?'. These were very engaging but the most powerful moment was when each participant offered the cultural gifts they had brought and spoke convincingly about why they had chosen their gifts. The idea of cultural gifts which we had seen as a potentially interesting aspect of the process became one of the most important ways of sharing culture and beliefs.

In the second workshop we used a large world map as the basis for assembling images that reflected the cultural heritage of the group and each participant wrote something in their heritage language. The session used the theme of 'dimensions of difference' and we used the technique of inviting participants to vote (using an audience response system) on propositions (Figure 3). The patterns of belief that this triggered was very powerful and a number of students felt that this was one of the most powerful set of conversations to emerge from the whole process. Many students discovered that they did not feel that they fitted into a particular culture: who they were was a fusion of two or more cultures.

Figure 3 Example proposition and student responses using the voting system



In the third workshop we examined organizational cultures, the languages we use to communicate and the way we misunderstand people from other cultures. We learnt to count to 10 in Chinese and count to 10 in Chinese with our fingers. We also learnt to write 1-10 in Japanese. All of these acts enabled those of us who were not from these cultures to appreciate what it must be like not to have the verbal or written language to communicate.

Conference

The final act of Cultural Academy involved the planning and facilitation of a conference by the core members of the Academy (the student authors of the paper). The idea of the conference was that it was a way of a) giving something back to the university through the sharing of what had been learnt b) a way of engaging and influencing the university. Sadly, while over seventy students registered for the conference only fifteen turned up together with a small number of staff. But this did not deter Cultural Academy participants. The conversations, dance workshops, quizzes and musical/visual cultural landscapes were excellent and we have film footage to prove it!!

In the run up to the conference Cultural Academy students worked with SCEPTRe's film team (BM & WP) to make two films: an identity 'I am' film – for YouTube (www.youtube.com) and an enquiry into our multicultural campus. Both films were shown at the conference. The conference closed with the presentation of certificates by the Pro Vice Chancellor responsible for the student experience. He was favourably impressed with what he had experienced. All of us who had been involved in Cultural Academy felt we needed an appropriate closure on the process so our final act was a post-conference celebratory evening complete with an international buffet and an African drum band. 'Dancing' to the beat of African drums was a most fitting end to the experience. Or was it the end?¹

Support for learning

SCEPTRe is involved in a significant programme of work aimed at enhancing opportunity for experience based learning of which Cultural Academy was one component. To support this work several new infrastructures are being created and these were utilized by Cultural Academy. They include:

- an on-line space (shareexperience.net) to encourage conversation and the sharing and recording of experience
- a new learning through experience award to value and recognise the learning
- a mentoring scheme to support and encourage reflection
- a wiki to support the production and accumulation of knowledge

¹ Subsequently, the student co-authors of this paper produced reflective accounts of their experience for the Learning through Experience Certificate and these were analysed by SCEPTRe's placement student (SC). We produced together this descriptive and evaluative account and three of students presented the paper at the Oxford Brookes conference 'Using Formal and Informal Curricula to Improve Interactions between Home and International Students in June 2008.

The important pedagogic ideas that underpin Cultural Academy are:

- collaborative learning
- productive inquiry
- immersive experience

Pedagogic practices within the enquiry process included

- concept mapping – to facilitate personal enquiry into understandings of culture
- cultural enquiry using simple question-based tools
- voting systems to reveal patterns of beliefs in response to propositions about culture
- story telling – descriptions of personal experiences and on-line blogs and postings to community forum
- mentoring to encourage conversation and reflection
- film making – enquiry into our multicultural campus, the recording of the cultural academy process and the evaluation of the process
- peer 'teaching' – the facilitation of conversation
- questionnaire surveys – on-line and paper based surveys of staff and students to gain their perspectives on our multi-cultural campus
- end process reflective account and conversation to consolidate learning using a set of prompts.

Micro Analysis of Talk-in-Interaction

An interesting conversational analysis was made by a student as part of her M level communication assignment. Taking one conversation facilitated by a student at the Cultural Academy conference she examined the natural talk-in-interaction patterns of intercultural conversations using Conversation Analysis (herein abbreviated CA). This research method involves an in-depth micro-analysis of the sociological and linguistic mechanics subtly underpinning typical, everyday conversations. The interactive discussion in the workshop studied focused on cross-cultural differences in medical practices provided a perfect example for CA analysis. One of the student participants facilitated the conversation amongst five intercultural students for approximately thirty minutes, which was audio recorded and transcribed according to CA conventions. The researcher used a modified transcription coding scheme based on the conventional Jeffersonian vocalic style (see Ten Have 1999:213), to visualize audible patterns of intonation, speed, emphasis, pauses, or overlapping speech. Thus in contrast to other communication methodologies, CA focuses not on *what* was said, but *how* utterances were made. Beyond the initial transcription stage, iterative rounds of qualitative analysis continually grounded emerging themes explicitly driven from the raw data. Although a wide range of analytic themes may be plausible, the researcher focused on two key areas of findings within the Cultural Academy conversations: the use of back-channel devices and the presence of co-constructed utterances.

Initial data analyses suggested clearly emerging patterns of back-channel devices and thus the retroductive need for additional literature review on this targeted analytic frame. Schegloff (1982:77) primarily focuses on back-channel devices which include small behavioral bits of assessment, tokens of interest, nonverbal nods, or utterances such as 'unh-hunh', 'yeah', 'I see', 'oh', etc. However, Duncan and Fiske (1977) claim back-channel devices include not only the expressions above, "but also completions by a recipient of sentences begun by another, requests for clarification, (or) brief restatement of something just said by another" (in Schegloff 1982:77). Thus to clarify the various conceptualizations, one might refer to Schegloff's category of back-channel devices as *continuers* and Duncan and Fiske's category as the *co-construction of utterances*. These two analytic frames form the primary scope of interest in this investigation.

The data suggests wide evidence of continuers, which according to Schegloff (1982), may signal a claim of continued attention to the speaker and serve to keep the conversation going smoothly. Such signaling devices can convey interest, understanding or agreement between the participants. Furthermore, the data shows evidence of two or more participants co-

constructing phrases in a collaborative nature, thus effectively speaking with one voice. As suggested by Coates (2007), collaborative co-construction may involve a second speaker adding just one word or an entire phrase to the primary speaker's turn in progress. Also included are sequences in which multiple speakers alternatively build upon the same idea, thus achieving a more evenly balanced collaboration. Multiple instances of these various co-constructed utterances were also found in the data.

Figure 3: Sample Transcript: "International Cooperation"

Ongoing discussion of drug developments across different countries.

226	DON: and that is mainly where medicine can develop more than where it is currently by mainly through these disciplines coming together	
227	VAL: mm, and by (.) international cooperation as well	Co-constructing same idea
228	LIZ: ye↓ahhh	Brief, falling intonation, continuer-style-assessment
229	JIM: and globalization	Co-constructing same idea
230	VAL: ye↑ah, exactly::: yeah that's why I think it's really important not only:: to health but to other aspects of life as well, to, yeah, that's why we come to here	Participant Observer Note: "here" with nonverbal cues may imply Cultural Academy.
231	DON: ye↓ah[Choral co-constructing falling intonation assessments
232	SUE: [yeah::[
233	LIZ: [ye↓ah	
234	VAL: [ye↓ah, I think that's the point, ye↓ahh ... (CUT)	

The final category of co-construction is the most complex, involving multiple speakers alternatively building upon the same idea with a mass 'choral' effect. Figure 1 below shows a tangible example from the Cultural Academy data corpus. In lines 226-229, four different speakers all chime in to build upon Don's utterance that medicine can benefit from different disciplines coming together. Val adds "international cooperation"; Jim adds "globalization", and Liz concurs with an assessment. The choral point continues again in lines 231-234 with all participants adding mass assessments of agreement to Val's utterance that international cooperation is important to different aspects of life as well, concluding: "that's why we come to here" (implying the Cultural Academy). Both the lexical content and choral co-construction format display the members' collaboration, cooperation, and agreement.

Ultimately this analysis concludes that the micro talk-in-interaction of participants clearly coincides with the macro objectives and principles of the Cultural Academy. One stated objective was to help participants "develop understanding, confidence and capability for socializing, working, learning and playing in a culturally complex world", which the data supports. The written Principles for Cooperative Learning were also reflected through the micro analysis of the supportive, collaborative nature of group inquiry and sharing. Whether or not participants were aware of these formally institutional macro principles, their individual interactions co-created the context which the Cultural Academy aimed to achieve. Thus following Heritage (1997), the intricate analysis of talk-in-interaction demonstrates the dialectical relationship between micro individual interaction and macro institutional structures. This CA research suggests that the participants' micro talk-in-interaction co-constructs the macro institutional context which the Cultural Academy aimed to achieve.

Evaluation of student experience

The overall student experience was evaluated in three ways:

- feedback forms at the end of each workshop
- electronic questionnaire at the end of the process
- evaluation or reflective personal accounts and interview by SCEPTre's placement student (independent of facilitation team) of six students who completed the learning through experience award

Teacher workshop evaluations

With an average score of 8.4 for the three workshops in response to the question 'How worthwhile was the experience? Scale 1 – 10' participants clearly derived benefit. The variety of learning activities was seen as a positive feature of their experience: each student drawing particular meaning and benefit from different activities. Some students felt that there was too much content and prescription in the first workshop so facilitators made a deliberate attempt to reduce the content and adopt a more flexible emergent stance in subsequent workshops. This was recognized and appreciated by students. The sorts of things students felt that they had learnt are indicated below.

What have you learned that you think might help in your everyday experience of meeting people from different cultures?

- To be open about my own culture in the hope that others will do the same to make understanding easier.
- That people have different interpretations of things
- Difficult to generalise cultures
- Culture is a very complex word- a lot of sensitivity.
- I think is the reflection and open up of mind that brought up today helps
- Be willing to immerse and listen
- Paying attention to details
- I have learnt that although people may belong to different cultures and have different beliefs to my own, they still have feelings common to mine
- Trying to understand deeply and go below the surface
- To be open minded and non-judgemental
- Most of the people on campus are respectful to different cultures and it is not enough to communicate with people outside our own cultures
- Differentiate, understand what the traits of people are, understand that not all people have the same comfort level.
- I've learned to appreciate the sensitivity of each individual's perspective
- Understanding that different styles of communicating and meeting do not necessarily correlate to traits they might seem to in one's own frame of cultural reference e.g. US-style - confronting – is good and productive rather than American meetings are brash and rude;
- that diversity of backgrounds lead to behavioural patterns,
- how immersion into the unknown opens answers for new appreciation;
- the role of body language, I think I need to be more aware of mixed signals I might be sending; how to explain something unique in my culture to people from other cultures;
- that Chinese people are soooo different ☺; apply the model that we build;
- about organisational settings – development – made conscious, importance of body language, aspects of organisations/structures;
- how a certain culture can be reflected through meetings and with these models can be quite useful; meeting style by different culture; knowing how they handle business meetings in different cultures

Student evaluation of personal accounts

Three main themes were identified; learning, environment and motivations, each with subthemes.

Learning

All participants learnt a lot from the experience, on several levels. On one level participants learnt new skills (one of the new skills I will take away from this experience') and concrete knowledge ('The names session taught me that whilst for some a name is simply a tag they are known by, for others it may be a form of family or cultural pride'). On another level, participants learnt much more abstract, conceptual knowledge. ('It was the first time I realized just how personal the idea of 'cultural identity' is to each and every one of us'; 'What I have taken...the complexity of concepts such as multiculturalism and cultural identity'). On another lever, participants learnt new perspectives to learning, that is common to their everyday lives. 'I began to feel that the type of learning I had been accustomed to was only one type of learning that could be beneficial'. Participants recognised that they learnt things in the Cultural Academy to a level they could never have reached in a classroom. 'much more educative than just reading about peoples' behaviour'.

'When I drew my map I felt it was quite comprehensive, and was doubtful whether I would be able to add much to it...I added plenty, developing ideas and adding new ones'.

Participants also learnt things about themselves and developed as people. 'I learned to...what culture is and to respect its deep meaning'; 'I learned to be more patient with others'.

Participants all learned new ways to research and ask questions, and all used terms in their accounts such as 'enquiry based learning' and 'appreciative enquiry'

Positivity

Participants, through using appreciative enquiry, discovered the need to look at the positive aspects and to celebrate the positive things in their cultures, whilst recognising the negative. 'The most important thing I have learnt in Cultural Academy is the positive attitude towards different cultures'.

Wider context

Participants generalised their thoughts and learning in the Cultural Academy to wider contexts. '...merging and building up of a culturally and socially harmonic society'. 'It gives you a flavour of how culture penetrates in every aspect of our lives'. 'Such education make our interactions with others in today's global society more rich and effective-learning for a complex world'.

Stereotypes

Participants expressed how much Cultural Academy made them think about existing stereotypes or assumptions they held, and whether these were a result of actual experience or the contexts they had been exposed to. 'I think there are a lot of impressions and judgements I had about certain countries or ethical groups...I started to think there may be a lot of assumptions we make'; 'I am more bound...and bear more pre-judgement about certain cultures, probably due to work or influence by mass media'.

Similarities and Differences

Another strong theme to emerge was the awareness participants gained of how very diverse cultures can share many similarities whilst also exhibiting vast differences. All participants said they were surprised by the similarities, suggesting they were all expecting the experience to highlight the differences. 'I discovered that there are many similarities'; 'we were not as different as we initially thought'; and realised the differences but also the similarities'.

Environment

Relationships

Participants expressed the importance in the relationships that had developed between those in the group. They said it was one of the best things about the Academy, to meet new and diverse people they would otherwise never have met. Participants said the support system that developed, particularly in terms of the conference, was very important and valuable to them, creating support, encouragement, leading to a the 'safety' to share personal things. Participants said the relationships that were built in the group came from trust, like and respect, which meant the group could achieve more. Participants felt all members had similar expectations and got similar things from the Academy, which strengthened bonds as they felt commonality in goals and expectations helped to build the relationships. They felt respect was incredibly important in the relationships within Cultural Academy, and this was set as the tone of the Academy. One participant felt it was a self-selecting group of people, which led to the forming of good relationships.

Communication

The theme of communication emerged in the accounts, with participants recognising the importance of communication, mainly through conversation, either informal or facilitated (such as through the use of the voting system).

A safe environment for sharing

Participants exhibited an appreciation for the safe and 'warm' environment the Cultural Academy provided. 'Because of the relaxing atmosphere, I feel very free to convey what I am thinking'; to have a place in which this can be achieved'. Participants conveyed how important it was to have a space such as this, as it allowed people to share very personal things, sharing which was essential for all to learn. This safe environment to share in led to participants forming a strong network of support. One said 'The support system that we built up ...definitely made the whole experience more unforgettable and rewarding'.

Motivations

Two clear motivating factors emerged from the accounts. Participants were motivated to respond to the email advertising the academy because the idea 'excited' them, which shows that emotions can sometimes be very motivating and also very personal. One participant said the positive emotions experienced regarding what they brought to the group, so externally, were very positive. However, this participant also expressed feeling negative emotions when discovering one's own ignorance and this was quite difficult and uncomfortable to experience. When someone experiences an emotional reaction to something, it is likely to impact or motivate them, to a much greater extent.

The second motivating factor was the participants' own cultural backgrounds. This was a largely motivating factor. For some participants it was their rich background of various cultures 'I have a very culturally diverse background', 'belonging to two minority groups myself' whilst for others it was to experience many cultures in one place; 'having spent my whole life in my won country'.

Participants also recognised the importance of understanding cultural diversity in this globalised world. 'Excellent addition to my CV', 'awareness of the cultural diverse environment'. Participants said it was important to manage expectations. They felt all had entered the Academy with similar expectations and goals, which helped the cohesion of the group. As it went on, their expectations changed slightly, and much of the impactful and valuable learning was unexpected. Participants felt the Academy had impact and value for all of them and they would recommend it to others.

What next?

The experience of piloting the Cultural Academy combined with the feedback from participants and the many good ideas that emerged through the process has given us much to think about.

At the time of writing (September 2008) we are promoting the next Cultural Academy. We are planning:

- to retain the basic structure and workshop format while refining the content and process of the workshops;
- design into the Cultural Academy right from the start the idea of enquiring into our multicultural campus and through this mechanism connecting our learning enterprise to the multitude of cultural events and activities that pervade our campus life. Through this activity to build a map or big picture of the life of our multicultural society and have a goal of producing a tangible output – a Guide to our Multicultural Campus.
- to add a 'Multicultural Welcome' in Freshers week to communicate to international and home students who feel that culture is something worth celebrating
- add a multicultural party within the process.

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APPENDIX Conversation Analysis Transcription Coding Scheme

Adapted from Jefferson in Schegloff (2007:265) and Ten Have (1999:213).

[onset point of overlapping utterances
=	latching between lines or utterances with no gap
:	prolongation or stretching of sound
:::	further lengthened sound 'beats' in approximately relative increments
(.)	micro pause 'beat'
(. . .)	additional pause 'beats' in approximately relative increments
?	rising intonation, particularly toward end of utterance (not necessarily questions)
↑ or ↓	shift toward higher or lower pitch in the sound immediately following the arrow
>x<	utterance within symbols are relatively compressed or rushed
°x°	utterance within degree signs are relatively quieter than surrounding talk
WORD	uppercase text is relatively louder than surrounding talk
<u>word</u>	part of utterance is stressed
(x)	uncertainty in possibly dubious transcription
((x))	transcriber's description of surrounding events, (e.g. background noise)

