

## Multicultural and multidisciplinary courses in communication online – why on earth?

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In my article, I reflect the pedagogical challenges and potentials of internationalization, multiculturalism, multidisciplinary and the usage of ICT in higher education. I focus on online courses arranged by the *Finnish University Network for Communication Sciences*, which has cooperated in arranging multicultural and multidisciplinary online courses for several years. I start by reviewing several recent transition lines in university cultures. Next, I introduce the network's courses in more detail and discuss the challenges and possibilities of this kind of education. Finally, I argue that despite all the major challenges of multicultural and multidisciplinary online courses, students can learn not merely interesting and current topics but also useful skills needed in both academic and working life. For instance, the ability to meet, recognize and negotiate differences is undoubtedly an essential competence in the globalized world.

**Keywords:** online courses, higher education, networks, cooperation, multiculturalism, multidisciplinary.

### Introduction: radical changes in university cultures?

During recent years, there has been a lot of (external) pressure to change universities and their conventions. Internationalization, budget cuts, European Higher Education Area and the increasing usage of information and communication technologies are perhaps the most essential factors, which have affected the ways we now discuss higher education.

In Finland, the late 1980s brought a new international emphasis to science policy. Universities by definition always been international, which is embedded in the ideas of universalism and communalism, but this em-

phasis was something new. Internationality was regarded as the key to improve quality and success in international competition, especially in small countries like Finland where collaboration is considered a necessity. This internationalism trend strengthened when Finland became a member of the European Union in 1995 (e.g. Hakala et al. 2003).

According to Finnish researcher Johanna Hakala (2009, 69–71), there are several contradictory lines in this new internationality discourse. On one hand, internationality is considered as an opening experience, especially for people living in small, homogenous countries. On the other hand, many are concerned about its uniforming effects on local practices. After all, even Europe is an ethnically, religiously, linguistically and culturally complex reality, as is the rest of the world. Scholars in the so called ‘soft sciences’ (humanities and social sciences) tend to think that the pressure for internationalization homogenizes research and makes it difficult to address all the important audiences of research. Johanna Hakala asks interesting questions, such as: What do we mean by “internationalization”? What is “good” internationality? Does “internationality” automatically lead to something called “quality”? (Hakala 2009, 69)

In education, ‘internationality’ can refer to several different aspects, such as 1) certain academic subjects (for instance international relations, international law, international communication); 2) subjects connected to certain international areas (for instance *Asian studies*, *Baltic Sea Region Studies*); 3) incorporating comparative international perspectives to certain subjects; 4) foreign language usage might be a part of internationality, as well as learning an international language at home and 5) to study in international groups at a home university (Garam 2006). The idea of the common European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has a great role in the internationalization of education. For instance, the EHEA has produced the *European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System* (ECTS), which should make teaching and learning more transparent and comparable (see European Commission, Education & Training, [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc48\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc48_en.htm)).

Despite online courses being often quite brief ‘trips’ to international groups, it is worthwhile to reflect on the concept of ‘multiculturalism’ in this context. ‘Internationality’ usually refers to quite short-term contacts but ‘multiculturalism’ is often connected to a more permanent coexistence of different cultures – and to the goals and ideals of this coexistence (e.g.

Rastas & al. 2005). The idea of ‘multiculturalism’ challenges one’s own practices in more depth. That’s why multicultural education means much more than just translating same old subjects into English (Räsänen 2002). Hierarchies and social roles of students and teachers may be very different in different cultures; the same goes for working habits, cooperation, competing and problem solving (Grasz & Kuortti 2002). For instance, more socially-oriented exchange students in Finland may feel quite disappointed with the scarcity of social relations with local students when studying (Garam 2001, 2002, Taajamo 2005). Also guidance and counseling roles have to evolve to meet the needs of individuals who cross cultures. This means, for instance, to understanding the complex processes through which people are members or nonmembers of communities and how their basic attitudes, values, norms, culture and cultural shocks are constructed (e.g. Launikari & Puukari 2005). Paying attention to these differences means general sensitivity to possible aspects, not stereotypical distinctions between students, who are – of course – always individuals.

When planning international or multicultural courses many aspects need to be figured – just to think about the varying understandings of ‘academic freedom’ in different parts of the world. The Americans Derald Wing Sue and David Sue (1990/1992) have created an often cited model for multicultural counseling, which can be easily assimilated to all kinds of teaching, tutoring and guidance. According to them, awareness of a counselor’s own assumptions, values and biases, the capability to understand the worldview of the culturally different students and developing appropriate intervention strategies and techniques might be valuable guidelines for any academic involved in multicultural teaching and tutoring (see also Nissilä & Lairio 2005).

## **Networking in networks saves the world – or money, at least?**

The great reduction in financial resources changed universities dramatically in many western countries in the early 1990s. For instance in Finland, the economic decline meant rapidly increasing number of students. Paradoxically, the number of academic teaching staff remained practically the same (Hakala 2009, 45–48). Departments had to create expense reduction practices and seek more external funding (e.g. Ylijoki

2000, 2003). Networking was seen as one solution to many problems. The general guideline was to share, collaborate and seek for synergy (e.g. Kivimäki 2005)

In practice, networking is not always as easy as presented in project plans. Finnish researchers Oili-Helena Ylijoki (2000) and Johanna Hakala (2009) argue the values, practices and funding of universities vary a lot. Even a single university does not form a one-voiced homogenous whole but a heterogeneous entity with many different small worlds. Research into the internal life of the university has shown that disciplines differ from each other both cognitively and socially. Disciplines have their own traditions, categories and problems even when they have a common cognitive basis. Furthermore there are many, varying cultural characteristics: norms, values, modes of interaction, pedagogical styles, understanding of teachers' and students' roles, professional orientations, demand of working life etc. The common and shared aspects are usually the new entrepreneurial and managerial practices of academia: every institution – and everybody – has to be innovative, international and on the Internet.

During the last decade there has been a lot of technology-oriented hopefulness connected to the great changes in university pedagogy and practices. Web-based learning was seen as a solution for many problems: online learning would be where students already are, that is, on the Net. Web-based learning would more interactive, innovative and creative. Online learning should save time and money, be independent from time and place and create more intensive learning processes.

Regardless of all the promises, strategies and financial investments, the usage of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in higher education has been more than challenging. Even 'normal' teaching skills, like basic knowledge of interaction, group dynamics and counseling, are not overly valued in universities because they tend to be more interested in research. On the other hand, educational development work is often conducted too much on technology's own terms and strategies tend to emphasize, for instance, machines, techniques, support services and training (Korhonen 2004, Kivimäki 2006). University teachers are not necessarily the greatest enthusiasts for adapting technology to higher education. Technology means often extra work, which is not the most essential part of a university teacher's profession. Many have suffered from

a disinclination for change, which is highly understandable in the context of the on-going changes in universities.

## **Multidisciplinary network and multicultural courses**

The Finnish University Network for Communication Sciences (UNSC) was established in 1998, after the great expansion of the communication field in the 1980s and 1990s. Experiences in older scientific networks encouraged national networking, as well as the financial support by the Ministry of Education (see also Hurme et. al., 2004). Nowadays, the network comprises 24 member units or lines in the field of communication, media and information studies in ten Finnish universities. Some member units are more involved in networking than others, but according to network theories (e.g. Barabási 2002, Eriksson 2003) this is not unusual. Networks are always imbalanced in a way, in the manner the actors are linked with each other. At the time of writing this article, the financial support of the Ministry of Education is about to end and the links are going to regroup themselves in a new way.

The UNSC is usually presented to be multidisciplinary in the field of communication, which encompasses a wide area ranging from information studies to journalism, speech communication, organizational communication, media studies, visual communication and graphic design. The UNSC's courses do not match exactly with any member institution's curriculum but can be used as substituting or completing courses in ways specified by member institutions. Also graduate schools gather together postgraduate students from the whole field.

'Multidisciplinary' is a word with many loaded meanings. Usually we see it in the context of new inventions, new projects, graduate schools, networks and of more or less established subjects such as cultural studies or women's studies. Many argue that multidisciplinary is more appreciated in project applications than, for instance, in appointments to office. On the other hand, the idea of multidisciplinary also reminds us of the old Humboldtian university where wide-ranging education was highly acceptable.

For a teacher, multidisciplinary courses are a real challenge because they demand a wide-ranging understanding of the field. As argued ear-

lier, rather than a shared paradigm, humanities and social sciences have different kinds of classical canons and schools, and students tend to value their own specific knowledge as the only one. There is a lot of tacit knowledge connected to the subjects, canons and schools and they play a great role in the academic social psychology (e.g. Ylijoki 2000, Kivimäki 2005). For instance, both teachers and students might use totally different words when discussing the same phenomenon, or use the same concepts but mean totally different things (Ridell & Väliaho 2006).

Finnish scholar Mikko Lehtonen (2006) asks whether or not multi-disciplinary education is possible. He argues that the modern division of academic subjects does not match with postmodern societies and culture and their continuously transforming complex questions. Lehtonen's suggestion is a break from subject based learning tradition and a reach towards problem-based learning with new perspectives. A starting point for this kind of teaching situation is not what is already known, but what you do not yet know.

## **Courses in practice: reading, writing and discussing**

Courses arranged by UNCS take place only on the Net, which means that we do not usually have any face-to-face – meetings. Partly this convention is due to money, as it would be quite expensive to arrange meetings where participants across the whole country could get to know each other. In addition to this, it would be quite time-consuming to participate in meetings, for instance, coming from the University of Lapland.

Because the network is large and has many member institutions, the number of students per course is also large, about 40–50. This is of course a challenge to course planning, designing assignments and activities, as well as to teacher performances. The assistance of the tutors, that is advanced tutor-students, is of great help for teachers. Tutors' duties are, for instance, to remind students about deadlines, feed and to modify discussions and make short summaries of weekly discussions.

Most of the network's courses are organized like a series of lectures, given by many lecturers. They are coordinated around quite wide-ranging themes, such as *computer mediated communication*, *democracy and citizenship* or *rhetoric, persuasion and effects*. Each course includes an introduction week, five different connected scholar contributions and

concluding discussions. 'Scholar contributions' usually refers to articles written by scholars from member institutions and their comments on students' discussions on that material. Introductions, closing sessions and evaluation are conducted by the network's lecturer.

The structure and activities of the courses are very simple: students read texts, do assignments, discuss issues by writing on the discussion forums, create new knowledge and write their own learning diaries – they do everything that is highly valued in new pedagogy. According to social constructivism theories learning is viewed as a social process that takes place in interaction with people. The simple structure makes courses easy to modify and replicate. Nobody has to travel anywhere and everybody has more time to think about their contributions than for instance in 'normal' seminars on campus.

Focusing on articles, discussions and learning diaries also has higher targets. After all, reading, discussing and writing are all essential academic skills and often needed in working life. Online courses work especially well when reading scientific articles. To get familiar with scientific articles and to learn to read them practically and in an appropriate way can function as a hidden curriculum (see Broady 1986) of these kinds of activities. Students learn topics, structures and expressions of scientific articles and reading techniques (e.g. Kivimäki 2007).

Discussions and group works are essential in online courses and it has been argued that online discussions help students learn better (e.g. Anttonen 2006). Successful discussions online may be a refreshing alternative in higher education, which often consist mainly of independent reading and writing, at least in Finland (Garam 2001, 2002). Reading and writing together is often more rewarding, as we can see in the marked revival of all kinds of voluntary studying circles. Discussions should encourage active, equal and thoughtful participation, motivate students to be more engaged and reflect topics more thoroughly, because they need to express them in their own words (Anttonen 2006).

In the network's courses, interaction takes place in asynchronous discussion platforms in the Moodle online environment. In general, students are required to submit their own contribution and to give two comments on each discussion topic. It is important to clarify that taking part in discussions is a duty, which is included in their grades. Of course, the number of the messages does not indicate their quality. In online cour-

ses, students can reflect and analyze their own experiences, create their own understanding in dialogue with other students, tutors and teachers. According to students' feedback, learning from other students is an advantage in these courses. They get a lot of valuable knowledge from all the participants, not only from the learning materials and from the staff.

In online courses, students have to write assignments, comments, presentations, summaries and their own learning diaries on a weekly basis. Some of the students do not like it, but writing is said to be a central way to process learned material (Tynjälä et. al., 2001). Writing is also an essential academic practice, because most of the humanities or the social sciences do not exist 'beyond' words and writings (Kinnunen & Löytty 2002). Writing assignments should also be well planned, because tasks transferred from face-to-face teaching onto the web seldom function. For instance, many small written assignments work better than essay-like answers and weekly learning diaries are more useful than larger final reports (e.g. Anttonen 2006)

A couple of examples from the course *Perspectives on Computer Mediated Communication* may clarify all these aspects. When dealing with scholarly communication in the net, the student's assignment is to answer the following questions:

1. *Introduce an open access or other scholarly digital journal from the following perspectives:*

- *Is it scientific?*
- *What field(s) does it represent?*
- *How often are its issues published?*
- *Is it refereed (peer review)?*
- *How many articles does it publish in a year?*
- *Describe the journal from a reader's viewpoint.*

2. *Introduce web pages or services that provide access to digital open access journals from the following perspectives:*

- *What fields of research or other activities do they represent?*
- *How many regularly published journals are there in each field?*
- *What other services do they possibly include?*



When discussing social media, students have to practice co-reading by doing this activity:

*Firstly, you should all read one chapter from the book "Social media" (Lietsala & Sirkkunen) and write a short summary of it. The idea is to briefly summarize the main points of the chapter for the others who haven't read it. There are twelve chapters in the book – one for everyone in this group of eleven. What you should do first is to reserve the chapter you prefer to read and summarize by answering this message. Everyone will read their own chapter, and this is how we can share the chapters easily. Post your summaries to the Summaries-topic.*

*Secondly, please do two tasks out of the given four following:*

*1. Social networking sites (like Facebook, LinkedIn, Bebo, Friedster etc.)*

*- Please ponder why do you think people use these services: do they want to make new friends, maintain old relationships, promote mainly their own ego or what?*

*- Have you noticed any signs of politics or political action (for example during elections etc.) on these sites? If you have, what forms of political action you have noticed? Could these sites become politically important in the future?*

*2. Blogs, videoblogs, podcasting*

*- Please ponder the relationship between the traditional media and bloggers in your country.*

*- Blogs are said to bring new issues and voices to the public discussion. Is this true?*

*3. YouTube as a medium*

*- Please analyze the core functions of YouTube. Do you think that is mainly for sharing already made professional material or does it function as a platform for new videomakers? - Could this kind of platform of visual content challenge the traditional one-way television model?*

*4. Virtual worlds (for example Second Life and Habbo Hotel)*

*- Please spend some time in Second Life or Habbo Hotel and analyse your experiences.*

*- Ponder the business models of the virtual worlds, are they realistic?*

*You can start your own discussion for each topic.*

## Conclusions

Networking, especially if it is mainly based on the usage of ICT, takes time and it does not develop unaided. Networking needs a lot of good will, face-to-face-meetings and financial resources. In some cases, networking and cooperation might be more connected to saving money than to the real will to cooperate and share.

A network's member institutions' disciplinary cultures may vary. Indeed, the understanding of basic concepts and theoretical backgrounds might even be contradictory. But this is not something that takes place only in networks. Even one specific discipline may include many different tribes, as Ylijoki (2000) describes them: groups with their own heroes, taboos and rituals. Networking is a real challenge in more ways than one – even in the same territory, like communication, which is also internally multivoiced by disciplines (e.g. Craig 1999, Ridell & Väliäho 2006).

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of networks' collaborative, multidisciplinary and multicultural online courses are broadly speaking similar to the experiences in the eHistory-project, which tested the possibilities of international cooperation in the field of history. All the projects' partners organized a joint e-learning course called *Identities in European History* and reflected their collaborative projects. In brief, the strengths were connected to transparency, access to different traditions and a wide range of digital sources, to interaction in learning communities and the possibility to learn marginal topics, which are not in the curriculum of one's own university. Weaknesses were, for instance, short tradition and lack of good experiences, work-load and problems concerning pedagogy, digital materials and source criticism. Opportunities were seen, for instance, as a possibility to study internationally, to reach for a greater number of students, independency of time and place, new teaching and learning methods and cooperative teaching. Threats are, for instance, the lack of institutional and continuing financial support, complex copy rights, conservative attitudes, overload of work, the dominance of the English language, false expectations, fast development in technology, undervaluation of online teaching by colleagues and certain kind of facelessness in teaching (Anttonen et al. 2006)

Learning in multicultural and multidisciplinary networks may pro-

duce creative space for collective thinking, where it is also possible to ponder and rethink current issues and concepts (see Ridell & Väliaho 2006). As many reports and clarifications show (Garam 2002), the most remarkable international learning outcomes are not necessarily bound to learning subjects, but to foreign language and new environments. Studying internationally is usually a highly comprehensive experience where contacts with others may be essential. At its best, international experiences may enhance the capability to grow apart from the axiomatic aspects of one's own culture, the capability to adjust oneself to new circumstances, the capability to find creative solutions and acquire social skills (Garam 2002).

The original reasons for the network's common English-language courses were practical: cuts in funding and increasing numbers of foreign and exchange students. Regardless of this unwelcome situation, the network has succeeded in creating some new ways to teach and learn. For instance, it offers students an opportunity to acquire the ability to meet, recognize and negotiate differences, which undoubtedly is an essential competence in the globalized world.

In addition to general academic skills, the network's online courses also respond to the needs of working life. The ability to meet, communicate and negotiate with people with different backgrounds is often defined as a working life skill. In my opinion, for each of us, it is valuable to get into circumstances where one's own position is not comfortable and self-evident. You have to meet many differences: native languages, cultural backgrounds, academic subjects, varying opinions and experiences. Sometimes, the most interesting discussions take place there, where diversity is the source of fruitful dialogue (e.g. Pirttilä 2005, 201).

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## **Daugiakultūriškumas ir tarpdiscipliniškumas nuotoliniuose komunikacijos kursuose**

### **Santrauka**

Straipsnyje analizuojami tarptautiškumo, daugiakultūriškumo, tarpdiscipliniškumo ir IT pritaikymo aukštajame moksle iššūkiai ir galimybės. Akcentuojami nuotoliniai kursai, kuriuos jau keletą metų organizuoja Suomijos universitetų komunikacijos mokslų tinklas. Straipsnio pradžioje apžvelgiami pastarųjų metų akademinės kultūros pokyčiai, toliau pristatomi tinklo kursai, aptariami tokių studijų iššūkiai ir galimybės. Nepaisant pagrindinių iššūkių, susijusių su nuotolinių kursų daugiakultūriškumu ir tarpdiscipliniškumu, studentams pristatomos įdomios ir aktualios temos bei jų akademiniam ir profesiniam gyvenimui naudingi įgūdžiai. Pavyzdžiui, gebėjimai atpažinti ir priimti skirtumus yra neabejotinai viena svarbiausių asmeninių kompetencijų šiolaikiniame globaliame pasaulyje.

**Raktiniai žodžiai:** nuotoliniai kursai, aukštasis mokslas, tinklai, bendradarbiavimas, daugiakultūriškumas, tarpdiscipliniškumas.