



# TOLERANCE EDUCATION AND AUSTRALIAN STUDIES AT THE SCHOOL OF ENGLISH AND AMERICAN STUDIES AT EÖTVÖS LORÁND UNIVERSITY, BUDAPEST

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines how the role of education is perceived at the School of English and American Studies at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest and its Australian Studies Programme with special regard to the general aim of our teaching, i.e., turning out critically thinking open-minded and tolerant graduates, who are able to cope with cultural differences in their work. Through a survey carried out at the School and the example of the Australian Studies Programme it intends to shed light on how content teaching can be supplemented with various educational aims, particularly tolerance education. While the study does not offer a panacea for all the ills caused by the lack of tolerance education, it points out that integrating awareness raising of social issues in university courses systematically, and offering opportunities for the students to reflect on various perspectives of these issues in a safe environment are very effective and certainly feasible ways of enhancing the chances of social inclusion.*

**Key words:** *Australian Studies, tertiary education, subject and tolerance education*

## Introduction

When thrown into water, pebbles make waves. The ripple effect depends very much on how skillfully and competently the throw is executed. Teachers also have a ripple effect on their students' development at all levels of education. The success of their work cannot only be assessed in terms of figures describing their students' results but also in the way their students' personality develops. However, tertiary

education mainly aims to teach subject knowledge, and does not usually consider the educational opportunities that lie in their boundaries. This article intends to demonstrate how Australian Studies – a small programme in our school – can be used in the diagnosis and to some extent the treatment of social problems surfacing in higher education. Using the metaphor of a pebble for Australian Studies, it is shown how – if thrown into the right pond and with the right technique – it can have far reaching ripple effects.

### **Australian Studies and the role of tertiary education**

It is 20 years ago that we set up the Australian Studies Programme at the School of English and American Studies at Eötvös Loránd University. The aim was to enrich the content of teaching about the culture, literature, history and linguistic characteristics of English speaking countries. The development of nationhood in Australia, the exemplary formation of its multicultural society, the reflection of these in literature and other art forms, or the features of Australian English are all valuable areas of study in their own right. However, going beyond these areas, the aim of the programme is to train well educated, critically thinking and broad minded professionals of English with an insight into Australian culture. It cannot be expected though that sheerly through acquiring knowledge, competences and skills related to their professional area, students would become mature graduates. In order for graduates to be critically thinking, open-minded and tolerant professionals, teaching has to be complemented by education. Personal development is particularly important in the training of foreign language professionals, who will encounter various cultures in their work. For them it is essential to understand cultural differences, and to be able to deal appropriately with misunderstandings and conflicts emanating from these. Thus the aim to educate has had a high priority in our Australian Studies Programme since its conception through various changes to the academic framework of tertiary education to our days.

As the initiators and providers of the Programme, the tutors of the various subjects of Australian Studies consider tolerance, acceptance, open-mindedness and reflective thinking essential qualities of professionals. Therefore, in designing the teaching programme, significant emphasis was placed on courses focusing on the multifaceted nature of Australian society, as the acceptance of diversity and multiculturalism in Australia is exemplary in the world. Multiculturalism is thus a key topic area when considering the overall aims the Programme has set out to achieve.

Multiculturalism in its sense of an egalitarian society integrating several cultural groups and promoting social inclusion is a phenomenon to be found in

different forms around the world. It has been regarded as the natural path for modern social development. Yet, as integration may also entail providing “group-differentiated rights” (Kymlicka, 1995) as well as catering for group-differentiated needs, which may infringe on majority interests, there has been a growing dissatisfaction with this policy, and leading European politicians, e.g., Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister Cameron (BBC 2010, BBC 2011) have made statements giving up on multiculturalism. According to Song (2010) the failure cannot only be attributed to security issues following September 11, 2001, but also to the failure to properly integrate and offer equal opportunities to foreigners. With this background in mind it is particularly important to note what Australian Immigration Minister Chris Bowen had to say in response to the criticism of multiculturalism in Europe:

To me, multiculturalism is a bit like a marriage. It has its stresses and strains. We have to remind each other occasionally that we are better off with each other. It takes nurturing; it takes care. It is in that spirit tonight that I quite proudly proclaim that Australian multiculturalism has worked. That not only has Australia benefited from the immigration of those who come from diverse backgrounds, but we have also benefited from the cultures they have brought and sustained in this, their new homeland. (Harris, 2011)

This attitude is part of the message that the Australian Studies Programme wishes to convey to its students. The need for this was obvious from the beginning of the courses. A memory from the early days of the Programme encapsulates and illustrates this need: In a class about Australian Aborigines, a student compared the lifestyles of the Australian Indigenous population and the Hungarian Roma. In her conclusion she came up with strongly racist statements against the Roma. It was interesting that in the discussion that unfolded the other group members unanimously disagreed with her and voiced their views in no uncertain terms. The incident should not be regarded as an anecdote. Its implications are to be considered seriously as today the situation is worse: we encounter similarly racist remarks in our days too, and these are not the expression of individual opinions. These discriminating views are often shared by many, and some students do not hesitate to put down their thoughts in writing either, which means that they do not understand the severity and unacceptability of their ideas. The spreading of the verbalisation of such discriminating views can probably be put down to a large extent to the fact that hate speech and discrimination are tolerated and accepted in public discourse in Hungary.

If such cases happen in training programmes turning out English language professionals, we have to ask ourselves: Can we do anything and do we do enough

to make our students more tolerant, accepting and considerate? More broadly, the question is whether general education has a place in tertiary training. This is highly debatable as our students are adults who are responsible for finding their own path in life. At the same time they are young and inexperienced adults, whom we can help by providing appropriate guidance.

Another issue that questions the justification of general education within the framework of tertiary education is the fact that the assessment of the performance of universities focuses on measurable facts and figures. It is thus no wonder that tutors concentrate on transmitting knowledge and easily dismiss other issues from their agenda or do not even consider them. The view to underline the concept of focusing on knowledge has been phrased by Portella (1991) as follows:

In reality, the social mission of higher education depends on the quality of [. . .] knowledge. Hence, excellence must remain the prime objective of any institution of higher education [. . .]. In other words, it is logical to put knowledge at the service of society so as to create a better world – more just and more egalitarian. (p. 22)

While knowledge is undoubtedly the key for living in a better world, which is more just and egalitarian – to reiterate Portella’s wording – and thus also perhaps more multicultural, Kuhnen’s (1978) observation is also noteworthy:

[. . .] the ultimate yardstick for measuring the success of a university is the improvement in the lives of the people it serves. The full benefit from a university can be obtained only if the university and society are organically linked together. Raised in another way, the needs of society have to be at the center of a university’s activities, and a flexible adjustment to changing needs is necessary but lacking – more or less – all over the world. (p. 79)

Although – as stated earlier – the Australian Studies Programme was determined from the beginning to include tolerance education and offer other ways of personal development for the participants, this is not an official element of educational policy at the School of English and American Studies at Eötvös Loránd University. The work of the School is rated very high and the University is also recognised as a leading Hungarian university. Success can be achieved in many different ways. It is therefore interesting to see how the teachers of the School view the role of education and particularly that of tolerance education as part of their teaching.

## **An empirical look at tolerance education**

In the summer of 2011 I made a survey among the teachers of the School of English and American Studies at Eötvös Loránd University. The purpose of the study was to get an insight into the teachers' perceptions of the aims of their teaching and their experience concerning prejudice and discrimination in their classes. The survey consisted of written interview questions circulated by email among the teachers of the School. The questions inquired about the colleagues' teaching and educational aims, in particular about issues of anti-discrimination, tolerance, acceptance and related concepts. They also asked colleagues to share their experience of tolerance education. (See Appendix A for the set of questions.)

28 colleagues out of the 86 answered the written interview questions. One might wonder what the number of replies implies. While it is impossible to draw any conclusions, it is perhaps safe to guess that the respondents were probably the colleagues who had an affinity with the issue anyway. It is in this light that the following results may be interpreted:

In answer to the question inquiring about the inclusion of educational aims into one's teaching one colleague rejected the need for general education saying that we can only be authentic teachers by representing teaching aims only. Two colleagues warned that incorporating general education aims too overtly into our teaching might be offensive to the students as they might feel we are treating them as children. Some colleagues said we are just not spending enough time with our students for educational efforts to affect them. Others explained that our task is to create opportunities which the students can grab if they wish.

Most colleagues (21), however, emphasised that teaching and education are inseparable.<sup>1</sup> These colleagues agreed that, we have an important role in:

- Providing professional training to increase knowledge
- Motivating students
- Offering professional skills development
- Ensuring personality development

### Note

<sup>1</sup> It might actually be interesting to ponder a little bit over the connotations of the terms 'tertiary education' in English and 'felsőoktatás' [higher *teaching*] in Hungarian, where the terms themselves may be seen to be prompting an attitude to some extent.

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- Creating a safe environment for the students' first intellectual attempts
- Not training programmed robots but reflective professionals.

Teaching is education. What the students learn greatly depends on teacher-student interaction, which in itself is educational. This is what a colleague had to say on this matter:

The university environment is probably the last place in the educational process where people's values and attitudes may still change. I don't think I want to impose my views on my students but I consider encouraging them to open up and be ready to see other people (and also themselves!) from multiple perspectives and showing them that their freedoms end where these infringe on other people's human rights as my most important educational tasks. (respondent 16)

This ties in with McKeachie's (2002) views on teaching values on top of the course contents. He maintains that as value free teaching does not exist since teachers radiate their values through the way they teach and behave in class, they should create opportunities for their students to debate and challenge values in class in an open and reflective atmosphere.

Concerning further educational aims that needed to be developed, the respondents indicated the following areas:

- Awareness
  - Critical thinking, reflectivity
  - Argumentation
  - Intercultural skills
  - Confidence
- Study skills and motivation
  - Openness, curiosity
  - Self-study
  - Active reading and listening
  - Concentration and focusing skills
  - Personal development
  - Enthusiasm, commitment
  - Need for life-long learning
- Co-operation and human relationships
  - Co-operation and efficient teamwork
  - Paying attention to one another
  - Supporting attitude

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- Attitude to work and responsibilities
  - Work ethics, professionalism
  - Responsibility, dependability
  - Respect for work
  - Skills to overcome difficulties
- Professional skills
  - Research skills
  - Discussion skills
  - Presentation skills
- Tolerance
  - Tolerance, acceptance, respect, anti-discrimination
  - Accepting multiple perspectives
  - Accepting diversity, variety
  - Skills for tolerance, e.g., openness, patience, empathy
  - Understanding the concept of 'difference'

The above seems a never ending list indicating such a large number of aims that can never be fulfilled. This list might even discourage or frustrate teachers. Yet, it was exciting to see how many different areas the colleagues marked as ones that offer opportunities for tolerance education:

- Age
- Social class
- Gender
- Racial and ethnic differences
- Nationalism
- Elitism
- (Linguistic) standardisation and prestige
- Linguicism
- Language policy
- Intercultural communication
- Teamwork, group dynamics
- Prejudice
- Environmental issues

These topic areas are clearly linked to specific subjects. It is easy to see that through these all the areas of English tertiary studies can contribute to tolerance education. Literature, history, language development, English language teaching methodology and even linguistics deal with issues that can and should be used to raise the students' awareness of tolerance, acceptance and social inclusion as



opposed to intolerance, discrimination or exclusion in the routine and often unquestioned practices of different societies or communities.

The teachers' own awareness of the issue may depend on whether they have experienced intolerance or tensions originating from exclusionist views in their classes. Out of the 28 respondents 19 have already experienced some kind of discriminating behaviour or opinion in class. Though 9 say they have not, even they mention some 'insignificant' cases. This leads to the problem of how to deal with discriminating views in class.

When asked about methods and also limitations for dealing with discrimination, the respondents named quite a number of possibilities:

- Listing counter arguments
- Explanation
- Presenting the historical and social context of the issue
- Questions to understand the reasons of discrimination
- Group discussions, initiating debates
- Role play
- Private conversations or written feedback
- Humour

While most methods in the list are self-explanatory, there is one that needs to be developed in some detail. Listing counter arguments is perhaps the method that one would tend to use automatically and sometimes even emotionally. However, it is important to bear in mind that – following the inoculation theory based on McGuire (1961) – counter arguments do not easily change a person's opinion; in fact, they may even result in strengthening already existing views because people often feel they are attacked and have a need to save face by sticking to their conviction and so they build a stronger set of arguments to support their original views. It is thus clear that counter arguments on their own can be counterproductive. Methods that allow students to – at least virtually – immerse themselves in a discussion or simulation stand a much better chance to challenge their originally discriminating opinion.

Some teachers do not feel it is their duty to challenge their students' views, but even these colleagues maintain that modelling the behaviour they consider desirable can be educational. This is expressed by one of them as follows:

I cannot change anyone else's thinking, but I can model the behaviour I would like them to demonstrate. I can also try to point out why such thinking needs to be re-examined. (respondent 12)

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It is a reassuring result of the survey that our colleagues find ways of creating opportunities for tolerance education and developing reflective and critical thinking in many of their courses. Several other studies, among them Guthrie, King & Palmer (2000), confirm that

efforts within higher education to develop and build students' reflective thinking ability [. . .] are likely to have an accompanying positive impact on their tolerance levels. [. . .] The converse may also be true: what educators do in the area of building tolerance might also help some students reach higher levels of reflective thinking ability. (n. p.)

Our English major graduates are likely to work in areas where they will be needing intercultural communicative competence. Reflection, tolerance, respect for and acceptance of diversity form an essential part of this, and while the development of these areas is important in every area of tertiary education, it is even more important in our field to integrate teaching and education.

### **The role of Australian Studies in tolerance education**

To demonstrate how throwing pebbles in a pond can actually create waves, the example of the Australian Studies Programme of the School of English and American Studies at Eötvös Loránd University is described below. It serves as a possible illustration for integrating the imparting of knowledge and tolerance education in the courses. An overview of the courses in the Programme is presented here in order to summarize the groups of subjects that are taught in the BA in English, MA in English & MA in ELT programmes along with the broad topic areas that are covered:

- Academic subject groups:
  - Australian literature
  - Australian film
  - Australian culture
  - Australian history and politics

These subjects are taught as interactive seminars.

- Practical/background subjects:
  - Australian culture and civilisation

The subjects in this category are taught as independent subjects or content based language development classes.

Some important topic areas that occur in most courses are as follows:

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- Colonisation / Settlement
- The Indigenous population
- Immigration / Multiculturalism
- The role of women
- Identity
- The role of the environment

The aim of the courses is to present and process the relevant topic areas. In order to uncover what perspectives play a role in the construction of specific topic areas and what contradictions may exist between a work of art and its interpretation, the analysis of the representation of these topics in literature or films is important along with that of critical texts. Naturally, we also deal with social and historical issues and their occasionally controversial interpretation. This way the students can discover what effects colonisation, the indigenous people, migrants, or for instance women writers have had in the formation of the Australian literary, historical and social canon. Getting to know and comparing multiple perspectives help in developing empathy and tolerance.

As an example, let us take a look at the case of the course entitled Australian Aboriginal Issues taught by Cecilia Gall. To begin with, the lecturer makes the students familiar with the history of the settlement of Australia, which is closely linked to the history of the indigenous people, to how – despite their culture of several tens of thousands of years – they became excluded from modern Australian society. Their current problems have their roots in the past. It is faulty reasoning to stigmatize and condemn them only on the basis of symptoms like alcohol, drug and child abuse, various crimes, etc. Important steps have undeniably been taken to ameliorate the situation but Australian society grapples with the problems and real solutions have not been found yet. The different governments try to solve the problems of the Aborigines in different ways, e.g., through granting benefits, or requiring work for benefits, community service or agreements with companies, etc. All this seems to be similar to the situation of the Roma in Hungary and to how the Hungarian governments try to solve the problems of the Roma, and this is the point where the comparative aspect is used in the class. Australia is a long way away. From Europe, it seems very exotic. Most people associate positive feelings and longing even with the word ‘Australia.’ It is no wonder that they regard the problems more exotic, too. So the students are more accepting towards Indigenous people. This creates a good opportunity to point out the hopeless situation of ethnic groups in our society and to examine our own attitudes towards minorities in the two countries. When the issue is first raised, the students’ attitude mostly reflects that of the majority culture.

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Another example could be described from a content based language development class entitled Australian Documentaries. In this course students discuss documentary videos on various topical issues, and they do their own research to elaborate on the topics in oral presentations or reaction essays. One major issue discussed is multiculturalism and immigration. Similarly to the Aboriginal issue, multiculturalism in Australia is seen differently from Hungary. Many students see it as an attractive and colourful life. Yet when considering the diversity of people and ideas, accepting difference in their own context, they encounter many difficulties. In a society where xenophobia is easily discernible, where both schoolchildren (Horváth, 1997) and adults (TÁRKI, 2007 & 2012) are shown to be racist and to be rejecting foreigners to a large extent, this is no surprise. Intolerance is due to historical traditions, patterns of socialisation and a host of other reasons. However, showing how multiculturalism works in Australia can help students understand and perhaps even internalise to some degree a respect for diversity and difference.<sup>2</sup>

These courses – just like others in the Australian Studies Programme – creates opportunities to examine majority–minority relations in depth and from multiple perspectives, which can lead to a maturation process during which the students hopefully develop a larger degree of social awareness, tolerance and acceptance. The results of the past two decades in the form of the students’ written and oral work, their attitudes that are reflected in these and in their course feedback certainly prove that we are on the right track.

Similar processes take place in other courses at the School of English and American Studies, and the survey mentioned in the previous section shows that quite a few colleagues make tolerance education part of their courses very consciously, indeed. And it is this consciousness or awareness that is at the crux of the issue in this paper. Tolerance education can only be successful if we incorporate it into our programmes very systematically, reflect about it and discuss it in and outside classes. The keywords ‘Consciousness’ – ‘Systematicity’ – ‘Reflection’ represent a process that characterises both the learning and teaching of tolerance.

#### Note

<sup>2</sup> Although it is not the purpose of this paper to detail the teaching materials used in the programme, a particularly useful video series has to be mentioned, which allows an insight into how intolerant views can be challenged and changed. This is: SBS (2011). *Go Back To Where You Came From*. DVD. Sydney & Melbourne: Special Broadcasting Service.

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Having intuitive, emotionally expressed – or rather just felt – and often biased views can be changed if one becomes conscious and aware of the social issues in question, gathers enough knowledge and challenges their initial stance. This, however, is not a one-time effort; it has to be done regularly and systematically in order to develop understanding and sympathy to ‘difference,’ i.e., values, practices and ways of thinking different from one’s own. Finally, it is important to realize that having just hazy and summative ideas about an issue can lead to hasty judgments rather than understanding. Therefore, the process also requires constant reflection; in other words, one needs to verbalize – even if only to themselves – the different perspectives of any particular issue. Knowing how the learning process is constructed, the steps of teaching can be tailored accordingly, and the makeup of the Australian Studies Programme allows for this to happen in its classes.

As a final word, it has to be mentioned that out of class activities ranging from film club gatherings, through public lectures to thematic events, like Tolerance Day presentations, can also contribute to the purpose, and the Programme has taken its fair share of these, too, providing opportunities for discussions. It is also in the spirit of these processes that the Australian Studies Programme and the Department of English Language Pedagogy initiated and formulated an anti-discrimination statement and thus have institutionalized our attitudes to the issue. The statement (see Appendix B) was accepted by the School of English and American Studies. It is also in this spirit that we can strive to find new ways of incorporating educational aims into teaching and thus to make far reaching ripples that help the development of our students.

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## Appendix A

The questions of the survey:

1. Please provide a few keywords or concepts that describe the educational aims in your teaching, the agendas incorporated into your subject teaching.
2. If *tolerance*, *acceptance*, *anti-discrimination* or related concepts figure among your aims, please specify topic areas that your courses allow you to concentrate on (e.g., age, gender, etc.).
3. Which of your courses allow for the inclusion of educational content related to *tolerance*, *acceptance*, *anti-discrimination* or related concepts? Please provide course titles and the programme you teach it in (e.g., BA, MA in English, MA in ELT, old MA, PhD), and indicate if the course is a seminar or a lecture.
4. Please give a short description of ways you include tolerance education or your other educational aims into your courses.
5. Have you ever experienced intolerant or discriminatory behaviour on the part of students, e.g., in class discussions, presentations, home assignments? If you have, please share your way(s) of dealing with such cases.
6. Please share some of your thoughts on the issue of teaching and educating at tertiary level.

## Appendix B

The Anti-discrimination statement of the School of English and American Studies  
at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

The School of English and American Studies at Eötvös Loránd University, is fully committed both to promoting freedom of expression and to respecting the rights and dignity of all people regardless of their ethnic or socio-cultural background, gender, religion, sexual orientation, disability, and political or other beliefs. As we consider diversity and respectful communication essential, we expect the same commitment from all the students and staff of the School in their everyday and professional discourse and behaviour.

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest