

Introduction to the International Classroom

Further Resources I Netherlands

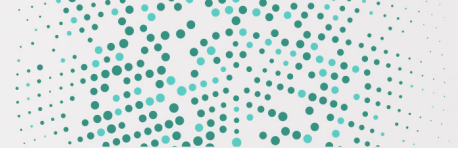
Leo's international classroom

Leo is an associate professor of Law at a Dutch university, with six years of university teaching experience. He acquired his University Teaching Qualification three years ago and last year he was asked for the first time to coordinate a Bachelor's level course focusing on Constitutional Law. This course is delivered in the 2nd semester of the First Year of an International Law programme taught through English and combines lectures with work in small groups. There were about 240 students on the programme last year, roughly 30% of whom held a Dutch passport. Leo is Dutch and teaches the programme with two fairly experienced colleagues who are also Dutch but from different parts of the Netherlands. For all three teachers, teaching through English is not new, but they are all still somewhat unfamiliar with the implications of teaching groups of students from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds.

Leo had previously taught for several years on the Constitutional Law course in the parallel Dutch programme, and he has been teaching the 'international version' now for three years. Now he is responsible for coordination, he is considering whether any changes are needed, but the formal course evaluations have always been very positive, and his colleagues do not see any reason to change things. However, while Leo is confident about the content of the course and pleased with how the lectures go, he is not entirely satisfied with the way students work in the small groups. Students work in groups of six, with at least three different nationalities in their group so that they can investigate the constitutions of 3 different countries.

As a teacher, Leo observed that while most groups succeeded, a minority of the groups this year struggled with their tasks, and this meant that a few groups really did not perform well. These latter groups came to see him to report their problems, but usually only towards the end of the course when failure was inevitable. Anecdotally, he heard that other groups also struggled from time to time but that they felt obliged to solve their own problems. In fact, one student told him over coffee that students thought that solving the problems in the group-work was considered part of the assignment, although Leo had never thought about it in this way himself.





It was difficult for Leo to put his finger on the reason for the way some groups struggled, but the few groups that did not perform well last year reported clashes between individual members, which they put down to clashes in personalities or different levels of motivation. Also, certain students, it seemed, were doing all the work, and Leo noticed that these were very often either local students or the so-called 'native speakers of English'. After attending a presentation on cultural competence at an Education Day, Leo began wondering whether the problems in the groups may be related to students' lack of cultural awareness and intercultural competence.

At the time he approached an Educational Developer for help, he was still not fully convinced that the problems in the group-work were culturally based. He was, however, sure that the resulting tensions in some groups were having a negative impact on the learning of a significant minority of the students, and that he would need to change a few things next time he was to teach this course.

version June 2019



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