LACE, A VIRTUAL COMMON COURSE ON 'CHANGING CULTURES IN EUROPE' FOR AN INTERNATIONAL MASTER

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Abstract

The LACE (Literature and Change in Europe) partnership wants to improve the international experience of master students and staff of the participating institutions through Erasmus exchanges and the elaboration of an open curriculum in the fields of literature, film and theatre. Universities involved in this project are: Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Aarhus University, Tartu University, Lisbon University, Universidad de Granada, University of Bologna and K.U.Leuven.

In this network we are working towards a joint and double international master's degree. We want to improve the 'internationalization at home' by stimulating the number of incoming and outgoing international students and teachers in the master programs at the arts departments of the involved institutions. The partners of LACE are progressive universities, with a long-term planning. Our current ambition is to start an Erasmus Mundus to attract more foreign students. In this common cooperation and mobility program our aim is to enhance the quality and diversity in our study field. To reach that goal, we started last year with a more intense collaboration, which we want to increase year by year.

It's our ambition to keep our eyes open for new input and remain a moving consortium in a moving society. An important step in this is a joint course between all partners. Starting from the academic year 2011-2012 on, the LACE partnership developed a fully virtual common course 'Changing cultures in Europe'. This course consists of 7 modules (one taught by every partner) on the broad topic of "Changing Cultures in Europe". For the alpha version we started with pre-recorded sessions (web lectures) which are available on our website, making intense use of Moodle with interactive chat sessions and forum discussions. The first students will graduate from this experimental course by January 2012, followed by an evaluation and possible adaptation of this course.

Keywords: Internationalisation, Moodle, networked curricula, virtual mobility.

1 THE LACE NETWORK: FACTS AND FIGURES

The faculty of arts of the K.U.Leuven has a long history in international collaboration. By joining the LACE group, seven European Universities have connected themselves to uplift their collaboration to a higher level. The partners will join their strengths in the field of literature and culture.

Addressing literature and art as cultural practices, LACE foregrounds the dynamics of tradition and innovation driving these practices. The cooperation focuses in particular on the following issues [1]:

- The interaction of literature and other arts (film, new media arts, theatre) with other regimes of representation, such as the discourses of science, religion, philosophy and politics, and their alternative regimes of rationality;
- Innovations in literature and the arts in response to technological challenges and opportunities, as well as to new media (both in the past and in present culture); the invention of practices of remediation and intermediality;
- The social responsibility and relevance conferred to literature and the other arts: this involves the investigation not just of their genres and forms, but also of their institutional conditions, of the forms of social agency which they allow, as well as of the value systems that they imply, or that underlie the ways these practices are legitimized. It also includes the analysis of the forms of ethics, ideology, and rationality that literature and other art disciplines present and foster, an analysis that takes into account the difference of artistic mediation, compared to the discourses of science, religion, philosophy and politics.
- The development of theoretical and methodological perspectives that allow to address these issues: it is an explicit objective of LACE to strengthen the theoretical reflection and
methodology within literary, cultural and arts studies, taking into account relevant
developments both in these and in adjacent fields (in particular, in the sociology of arts and
culture, and in cognitive sciences).

Defending a multilingual and cross-cultural approach that reflects the cooperation between institutions
from diverse regions of Europe, and focusing on both continuities and discontinuities in European
cultural history against the backdrop of exchanges with the ‘Tout-Monde’ (Edouard Glissant), a
globalized world undergoing an intense process of cross-fertilization and creolization, LACE strives to
document and analyze the ways in which the arts - broadly conceived - contribute to western culture’s
self-reflection.

1.1 Main principles of the collaboration

From the beginning, the project, which is founded on a strong personal acquaintance and
understanding amongst the participating members, was relying heavily on ICT. It is our strong belief
that the use of ODL technologies and a policy on Open Education Resources are the decisive
enabling factors to reach these goals. Three ingredients are deemed crucial for a successful
realization of the project.

1.1.1 Transparent information

To stimulate students to take one semester at one of the other participating institutions, it is imperative
that students are clearly informed about all the details of their semester abroad. A long tradition in
dealing with both inbound and outgoing Erasmus students has strengthened our view that very explicit
information on each administrative step and the many social issues involved are well documented.

This is why in the context of LACE, a portal website has been developed where students and
professors alike can find all the relevant information about each institution. In a first phase it has been
used to inform students about the project and partners, and to invite teachers and professors to give a
block seminar in one of the partner institutions.

1.1.2 Open Courses

An integral part of the solution is to put the courses of the participating programs online, so that
students can follow what is going on from anywhere, and can get a quite precise idea of which course
they would want to take abroad. We use Moodle since it allows in a very transparent way, not only to
show the content, but also the whole workflow and activities involved in a course. Through these open
Moodle courses, students have a virtual portfolio of the different courses that are available in the
consortium, which in a second phase, we hope, will help to attract students from outside the
consortium. Our first course online is ‘Film and Literature’, a collaboration between the university of
Leuven and the university of Granada. To simplify the cooperation we not only offer the full course
material online, we also film all colleges in Leuven to offer them to the students abroad through web
colleges in Moodle. The second course is the new joint course “Changing Cultures in Europe”, which
we will discuss below.

LACE is currently involved in the EU funded project “Open Courseware Europe”, and plans to offer its
courses under the OCW banner.

1.1.3 Interactive workspace

Of course, student activities must also find their way online, so that students can truly interact not only
with students abroad but also with their home base. Extensive use of Skype, videoconferencing and
the Drupal CMS enables us to maintain multimode communications throughout the curriculum. How
technology plays a crucial role in all this, is explained extensively in chapter three. It provides us
indispensable tools to create an interactive workspace, for students as well as for staff.

1.2 Partners

1.2.1 K.U.Leuven, Belgium

The Catholic University of Leuven, founded in 1425, caters to more than 40 000 students and around
12% of them are international students from more than 120 nations. The history of the Faculty of Arts
runs parallel with that of Leuven university, with about 3400 students in its 13 basic academic
programs and 15 advanced programs [2]. In Leuven there are three master programs involved in
LACE: the master in Western Literature, the master in Literary Studies and the master in Cultural Studies.

Leuven took the initiative for the consortium in 2009, under the impulse of project leader Prof. Dr. Jan Baetens. Until now the central communication and administration point for LACE is done by a project collaborator at the CS Digital centre of the Institute for Cultural Studies at the K.U.Leuven [3].

1.2.2 Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, The Netherlands

Founded in 1614, the University of Groningen is one of the oldest universities in the Netherlands with almost 27 000 students. The University of Groningen enjoys an international reputation as one of the leading research universities in Europe [4]. In the Faculty of Arts, with more than 5000 students, the master program in Arts, Culture and Media is involved in LACE.

1.2.3 Universidad de Granada, Spain

The Universidad de Granada, founded in 1531, continues a long teaching tradition with seven University Campuses spread throughout the city, with over 70 000 student of which 13% are foreign students. The UGR is the leading European university in terms of receiving foreign students and the second Spanish university in terms of the mobility of its own students [5]. LACE signed an agreement with the departement of Comparative Literature for cooperation.

1.2.4 Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal

The University of Lisbon has roots going back to 1911 and has anno 2010 over 22 000 students. It's an internationalised University thanks to the close relations fostered with research groups and its ability to attract foreign students [6]. The Humanities School of the University of Lisbon is involved in LACE with their Centre of Comparative Literature.

1.2.5 Aarhus Universitet, Denmark

Aarhus University has an international focus and makes targeted efforts to attract researchers and students from abroad. It's Denmark's second oldest and second largest university. The university was founded in 1928 and has an annual enrollment of more than 37 000 students [7]. The department of Aesthetic Studies and Comparative Literature joined the LACE network to reach their goal of internationalization.

1.2.6 University of Bologna, Italy

The University of Bologna was probably the first University in the western world. Its history is one of great thinkers in science and the humanities. Bologna has thus been called upon to forge relationships with institutions in the most advanced countries to modernize and expand its activity. Among the many challenges which it has met with success, Bologna committed itself to the European dimension which has now led to adoption of the new university system. The Bologna Process is an important process of harmonizing various systems of European higher education that has the objective to create a European Area of Higher Education and to promote the European system of higher education on a worldwide scale in order to increase its international competitiveness [8]. It's within this system that the LACE network is born.

1.2.7 University of Tartu, Estonia

From its earliest days, the University of Tartu has been an international institution both in its vision and in its actions. The Semiotics department of the university of Tartu has become the newest partner in the consortium. The University was founded in 1632 by the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus. UT is Estonia's leading centre of research and training. It preserves the culture of the Estonian people and spearheads the country's reputation in research and provision of higher education [9].

2 FOUR STEPS APPROACH

To make the project manageable we're working in four steps. As the partners get to know each other better and better, we're increasing our collaboration step by step. Our project is ambitious in building a common program, in which teaching and research will be more intertwined. All steps are valuable and we don't have a final and limited goal. It's our ambition to keep our eyes open for new input and remain a moving consortium in a moving society.
It's our strongest belief that collaboration can be useful on every level. It's the process towards a networked curriculum that's as useful as the network itself. It's very difficult to predict all possible obstacles before the collaboration. Once you collaborate you realise that social, legal and organisational differences can slow down the process.

2.1 Erasmus exchanges and foreign students

In step one of the LACE project, which has already started, we want to foster students and teachers exchanges in a multilateral way between the partners. For the students, this will take the form of the traditional Erasmus exchanges; for the teachers, these exchanges mean that they are inviting colleagues from abroad to give short block seminars within existing courses or seminars. But also, they are encouraged themselves as well to insert such block seminars in their own courses or seminars.

The advantages of such a system are manifold. First, it's a simple but very efficient way to internationalize the course offerings with the expertise of foreign colleagues. Secondly, it helps all partners to learn in a practical way how the partner universities are working and how collaborating with them is experienced. A third and very important advantage is that it helps as well to start building the common program of steps two and three. Finally, it is cost- and labor-neutral, since the costs involved can be paid with the Erasmus budget of each partner while the work involved is a matter of giving and receiving. The partner university that offers to send someone abroad for teaching a block seminar, can also ask to receive a colleague from abroad to teach something equivalent in the local institution. In order to organize all this we have built a portal website in Drupal in which all relevant information is gathered. A crucial part of that website is the "dating site", in which the announcements of all partners are collected, regarding who would like to offer what and receive which kind of block seminar in return.

Besides the traditional Erasmus exchanges, it gives the universities the time to adapt their teaching language towards English. The university of Leuven has since 2010 a full English program in Cultural Studies. This language issue is an important step to attract more foreign students. It gives them the possibility to take a full master program of 60 ECTS in English, what in the past always was a difficult issue. With this adaptation of courses and teaching language, the Master in Cultural Studies was already able to attract over 20 students from all over the world. These students can also count on special guidance for their thesis and internship.

2.2 The LACE Joint Course on Culture and Change in Europe

Starting from the academic year 2011-2012 the LACE partnership developed a fully virtual common course 'Changing cultures in Europe'. This course consists of 7 modules (one taught by every partner) on the broad topic of “Changing Cultures in Europe”: 'Literature and Literacy in a Changed Media Environment', 'Literature and Photography', 'Narratological Key Concepts', etc. The emphasis of every module should be on the European context as ‘common ground’. For each module, the professors are asked to add a selection of 5 sources to the mandatory and recommended reading list. A different module is (virtually) taught every two weeks until all seven modules are completed; this gives the course a total length of 14 weeks. Every module consists of two blocks of 45 minutes each. The maximum number of allowed students is five per partner. The course is virtual, so the inscription takes place online on the LACE website. Currently each module consists of the videotaped lecture, an introductory text, the required literature and an assignment, which can be a mandatory forum discussion or a paper. For each module, there is also a chat session with the professor.

The format of this new course is still under discussion, for the alpha version we started with pre-recorded sessions which are available on our website, making intense use of Moodle. In other words: we use the same format for all participants for the first edition of the course. Streamlining the format should help us to avoid major technical issues or confusion (instead of real time/live videoconference sessions). However, the second edition can offer mixed formats, as we will necessarily fine-tune. All partners have different levels in technical know-how, available equipment and software/application preferences, this can sometimes slow down the collaboration process. On the long term adding smartboards would be an ideal solution to merge virtual and physical classrooms. We are also looking into adding interactive solutions such as Wimba or Adobe Connect. Another challenge for this common course is the evaluation procedure. During annual gatherings hosted by one of the partner institutions (ex. The LACE-weekend in January 2012) students will give a presentation about a subject of the course. Other possible assignments are a final essay, Wiki, debate, Skype session, etc. The
first students will graduate from this experimental course by January 2012, followed by an evaluation and possible adaptation of this course.

2.3 A double and joint degree

It’s our ambition to go beyond what is going on in step one. In step two of the project, for the very close future, we would like to have a common program, whose core business will follow the lines of our mission statement. This common program will entail two aspects: on the one hand, there will be courses that already exist. Courses which are locally offered by each partner and that can be shared with others; on the other hand, we are building new, really common classes and seminars, which have been conceived in a joined manner (a summer school and other initiatives may for instance play a role in this regard, also online courses and distance teaching). The main idea is to fine-tune the mission statement first, and then to see how to invent/implement that common program. Moreover, we would like also to reward students who take part in this common program (and in the exchanges in general) with a system of special certificates and double degrees. The Bologna Process has paved the way for double degrees. In this case both universities, home and guest university, sign the diploma that an Erasmus student receives. It counts as a 'double diploma'. In the case of a joint degree, the collaboration goes even further. In this case students who have completed the foreign program ideally obtain a degree awarded jointly by the participating institutions, and fully recognized in all countries [10]. The latter requires an adapted legal framework in the participating countries.

To prepare for these steps, the LACE network participates in the EADTU-led LifeLong Learning project “Networked Curricula” [11]. In this project, LACE is compared with 18 other initiatives in networking for curricula, covering a large spectrum of formats, ranging from joint courses to multi-partner networked curricula spanning entire disciplines. The exchange of views, experiences and best practices help LACE to develop its own strategy.

2.4 Erasmus Mundus

Step four finally will consist of the Erasmus Mundus application, the international counterpart of the Erasmus program, we are willing to do in 2012, which will be based on our common program. We are willing to develop a unique European Master offered by our LACE Consortium, of which all partners are recognized higher education institutions from one of the 27 Member States of the European Union [12]. At this level, it will be very important to know precisely how the common program will be organized and implemented, but for the moment everything is still open for discussion.

3 INTERNATIONALIZATION AS AN EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENT

LACE is not just a network that aims some added value by improving mobility between teachers and students. There is something very compelling about the LACE concept, something rather urgent indeed. The idea is that in the current context, the master programmes involved feel they need to internationalize to be able to reach their stated pedagogical goals.

Whether it involves a Master in Cultural Studies or in Western Literature, the cultural background of the teaching is definitely European and can only be fully experienced in a transnational context. For Cultural Studies, this is in particular the case in two main strands of Master dissertations that are proposed to the students. Each year, a sizeable group of students chooses to work on Cultural Heritage. Both the referred academic literature as the practice involved is clearly forged by common European history. Furthermore, heritage involves the risk of misguided nostalgia and idolatry of a mythical past. By direct confrontation with different viewpoints of fellow International students, a much richer context is shaped, that allows the master students to really understand these phenomena on the scale they require. As for the second important strand involved, students studying Digital Culture and Media, for them operating in an international setting should be second nature.

The course on Film and Literature is exemplary for what is meant. By pairing Belgian and Spanish students to work on assignments, different backgrounds are activated and a more challenging discussion can emerge [13].

For these reasons, partners involved in LACE are keen to host a more “International” mix of students in their classrooms. In the case of the Leuven – nearby Brussels – programme of Cultural Studies, this is also required to form people that can actually conceive, develop and lead inspiring and credible cultural projects that are up to the standards one might expect in Europe’s Capital City.
4 THE JOINT COURSE: HOW IT WORKS

4.1 The LACE website

The LACE website [14] is based on a Drupal CMS. The CMS allows easy updates to the website from anywhere in the partnership, but as is often the case it is one collaborator at the Leuven Office who actually takes care of the follow-up. Partners mail their content updates to be included. The website has specific entries for participating staff as well as students. For the student section, a standardized checklist is used by each partner to provide practical information about the exchange. The site also hosts the application forms required, and offers information about the destination university and the admission requirements. The site is only provided in English.

4.2 The Moodle courses

To improve mobility amongst the students and teachers it is important that each involved institution has state-of-the-art e-learning tools at its disposal. Of course, in some cases these solutions are optimized for face-to-face teaching and are not really meant to be used outside of a blended learning context.

That is why we opted to deploy a smaller, dedicated Moodle platform for LACE [15]. Of course, we could have used one of the partner’s e-learning platforms, but the problem with the latter is that those are mostly optimized to integrate with the university’s backend and the student registration procedures. While this is highly beneficial for the main classroom teaching business, it just doesn’t work out for an internationalized context, where unregistered students from network partners have to participate in the virtual learning activities. While negotiations are underway to open up our university legacy e-learning systems to fit internationalization requirements, adopting Moodle as an intermediary, faculty-scale solution proved a cost-effective approach.

For students, working with different accounts on a multitude of websites is no longer felt prohibitive and matches their more general and private online experience. It also cuts coordination overhead and stimulates innovation, since each institution can work at its own pace. It also aligns with the university policy, which chooses to create a learning environment out of separate, independent components using an open architecture rather than deploying one monolithic solution.

4.2.1 Film and Literature

In the Moodle environment each partner will provide open courses that are to be part of the LACE consortium. An example is the Film and Literature course from Leuven University. It follows a weekly format, with course text and materials provided for each week. The lessons taught in Leuven by Prof. Jan Baetens are also recorded and integrated into the course. This serves two goals: students can view certain sections again when they want, and students at a distance, e.g. students in Granada who are also taking this course, can tune in to the lessons. Moodle also provides in a wiki facility that normally is used in this course to allow hybrid student groups (Leuven/Granada) to collaboratively work on a paper assignment.

Forum discussions are an important part of learning interactivity for this course, and the forum discussions are also organised on a weekly basis.

4.2.2 Changing cultures in Europe

In September 2011 we started with a joint course made by six of the seven partners (minus Tartu). The course consists of seven modules on the general subject of literature and culture. Every university selected a professor who teaches a module of two hours about his expertise in this field. We made use of the topics format in Moodle. All modules had the same layout and are built in the same way. A module consists of: a couple of pages course text written by the professor, preparatory reading texts in pdf, a web lecture of one to two hours filmed in by the audiovisual support of the university (professor and PowerPoint), the PowerPoint presentation of the web lecture, a forum for discussion an questions on this topic open to the students and the professor, chat room where the professor participates in during one hour, an exercise (this can be a paper on 2 to 3 pages on the topic or participation in the forum discussion) and a drop box to hand in this exercise (see figure). We expect participation of the students in this way of teaching. Interaction between the students is crucial. The students get a timeline with when they should start with which module. In this way we try to stimulate the interaction between the students because they are working on the same module in the same week. Students could work two weeks per module, in this way the work was well separated over the semester.
although the course still has a high workload. In the middle of these two weeks we organised a chat session with the professor who prepared the exercise. Students should have followed the web lecture by then. Afterwards they still had a week to write the paper and deliver it in the drop box. We tried to work with tight deadlines in the benefit of the students. Students were evaluated on the basis of the average of their seven papers in combination with their participation of the course. This gave a result on 20 which will be communicated to the students at the end of January 2012. Every professor corrected the assignment of his own module.

![Fig. Module 4 of the course](image)

In this first pilot edition of the course we selected 14 students to take the course. Every partner selected two to three of his students. This course replaced one other obligatory course they had to take and counts for 6 ECTS. After evaluation of the course we like to offer an adapted version to an unlimited amount of students from September 2012 on.

### 4.2.3 Student feedback

At the moment (January 2012) we are in the middle of the exam and evaluation period. As a final assignment we gave the 14 students the possibility to write their feedback and evaluation of the course. Some of the students are also invited on the evaluation meeting with all partners to rewrite the course for a next edition. The core of the course will stay the same but some aspects need to be changed to give the students more structure. The overall feedback on the course was positive, especially on the topics covert and the content of the course. Here are some quotes of the students:

"Every module presented interesting information, and I think that the professors all seemed knowledgeable in their subject matter, were engaging and did a good job, especially given their limited time frame, of introducing a different topic, all centered around European literature, its history, changes it is undergoing and the possible causes of its past and present transformations from many interesting perspectives.

"It is interesting to notice that all the questions treated were linked among them, giving a great picture of arguments to discuss, that justifies a sort of common line of study which is "Changing cultures in Europe".

"I found really great and helpful the idea of having a supervisor in this virtual community."

The students criticized the most the sometimes changing deadlines and lack of clarity of the assignment. By next year we need to improve the use of the forum, chat box and drop box.

"One last thing that could possibly be improved would be a bit more regularity with the due dates. This isn't necessary, but it is just nice to have some degree of regularity with the videos and coursework. Towards the beginning it wasn't really a problem, but at the end sometimes we didn't find out the due date of assignments or the time for chat sessions".

"The work load was appropriate; I liked that there were several smaller assignments rather than one big one to reinforce each module."

"Maybe it would not be a bad idea to limit the virtual lessons to time of more or less one hour. It is my experience that I would usually pause or replay some parts I had missed several times which ultimately took me a lot more time than initially planned."
"The system of deadlines wasn’t always stable"
"What I would change is for example the organization of the chartroom".

Students also gave us some useful tips:

"It would be great to make possible to download the lectures, so that we have them in our laptops in the case we have to face similar topics in the future".

The overall evaluation of the course is positive, we’re very happy with this feedback:

"It has been quite an experience and I’m thankful I was able to be a part of it, even though it was a very intensive course."

"It was at times a bit strange taking part in an e-course, but I think it was a valuable learning experience to see how such a course operates. It was very interesting interacting with students and professors from all over Europe, and to take part in the pilot version of a course whose topic seems particularly significant given the change in Europe that we see all around us".

"In this way, all the distances have been totally removed and students, of all over the world, have had the possibility of studying and enjoying the course exactly in the moment when they could do it".

"It's more important characteristics are the modern tools that professors and organizers have used and that make it modern and in the vanguard of the new way of considering the study and the university."

5 CONCLUSION

We presented LACE as a partner effort of 7 institutions to improve the international experience of master students and staff of the participating institutions through Erasmus exchanges and the elaboration of an open curriculum in the fields of literature, film and theatre. It offers ‘internationalization at home’ by stimulating the number of incoming and outgoing international students and teachers in the master programs at the arts departments of the involved institutions.

We showed how the use of ICT, in particular ODL technologies and a policy on Open Education Resources where enabling factors to reach these goals, following three guiding principles: transparent information, open courses, interactive workspace. A four steps approach helps us to forge the cohesion between partners and have a realistic, manageable roadmap: starting with Erasmus exchanges, as well for staff as students, and attracting foreign students, the second major step has now been taken with the LACE Joint Course on Culture and Change in Europe. This gives us more time to assess the possibilities of a double and joint degree, which will be implemented through the submission of an Erasmus Mundus proposal in 2012.

We have stressed that LACE is not about internationalization as such, but internationalization as a requirement to reach our educational goals: Cultural Studies as well as the study of Literature is impossible without multilateral viewpoints and an internationalized audience.

Finally, we have presented our Moodle courses, including the web lectures, forums and chat-sessions. We are of course very pleased to be part of the Moodle community and will take a step further in the Open Courseware Europe project, to firmly embed LACE into Open networks.

We feel strengthened and heartened by the positive feedback we got from our pilot students, since of course their education is the final goal of all these efforts.

REFERENCES