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NOT JUST TEACHING BUT 'PEACE-ING'



In the modern university, academics often shy away from taking on the role of educating students on sensitive issues. In complex societies like Israel, internationalisation of the curriculum – perceived as neutral ground – offers an unlikely path for generating classroom harmony.

Imagine teaching in a war zone, running to a shelter with your students when the siren goes off and then returning to class to continue the lesson 'as planned'. To complicate matters further, imagine your class is a rich blend of ethnicities, religions and very polarised views of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. What do you do now? You're just an English teacher in a college and you were never trained to deal with a situation like this. How do you even begin to address your students' anxieties and fears? How do you make room for their different emotional reactions and intense opinions? What are the expectations of the institution from you? Wouldn't it just be easier to pick up where you left off and get back to the text you were reading with them?

EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Luckily this dramatic setting is not an everyday scenario, but even in its absence, heightened political and religious tensions – as well as national security issues – constitute Israeli reality.

Traditionally, higher education institutions refrain from addressing any of these themes in the classroom, relying instead on 'good old' academic materials to work their natural melting-pot magic. Students are expected to sort of 'come together', regardless of personal background, as they adhere to the same academic standards.

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Academics normally see their primary role as communicators of knowledge and less as educators. One cannot be overly critical in this case; after all, introducing and embracing these sensitivities in the classroom can indeed be risky, and involve a deviation from the sterile academic route. But what if there was a viable option to

include a celebration of religious differences for example, or any other national social tension for the matter, and make Israeli higher education an even more powerful agent of social change?

INTERNATIONALISATION

Several academic colleges in Israel that participated in the TEMPUS IRIS project have identified the vast potential of internationalisation of the curriculum in resolving existing tensions. Internationalisation of the curriculum was found to be a useful tool to introduce change on both the practical and content level.¹ Since the term 'internationalisation' carries a relatively neutral tone – free from any local-social sensitivities – colleges readily admitted that when the term was attached to their activities, they had a far greater potential of being embraced both by faculty and students. On the content level, internationalisation offered an option to "imagine new possibilities" rather than just "critically reflect" on existing curriculum, thus providing an opportunity to bring in new pedagogies and fresh content.²



In one college, for example, the English for Academic Purposes curriculum was revised to include more practical language skills and move beyond reading comprehension. Internationalisation of the curriculum was interpreted by the teachers involved in the process as embedding language proficiency relevant to contemporary global needs. As a result, a project-based learning module was added, where students were required to present a comparative analysis of two selected academic papers in English to the rest of the class on a topic of their choice.

Students were instructed to work in pairs and encouraged to select a topic they have a personal interest in. In one case, a group of Bedouin students chose to discuss feminism in Islam. They presented an analysis of the topic from a religious, theoretical and practical perspective, and managed to create a lively discussion among their Jewish classmates, effectively removing any automatic associations the latter may hold between terror, male dominance and Islam. This discussion was not only highly informative and academic,

but also opened up the option for a more personal Jewish–Arab interaction following the lesson.

UNDERSTANDING ‘THE OTHER’

In a different college for teacher education, internationalisation of the curriculum directly targeted Jewish–Arab tensions. Their belief was that intercultural sensitivities would be best addressed through personal experience and intimate study/work exchange, driven by the notion that a personal connection is the best way to de-alienate the ‘other’. An intercollegiate course was developed, in which students worked in mixed cultural groups on different projects – a practice which is expected to be replicated in their future classrooms when they themselves become teachers. This experience yielded not only close mixed-cultural friendships and professional collaborations, but also a group of future teachers who can now naturally communicate the acceptance of the ‘other’ to their future primary school students.

In yet another college – an Arab-speaking education college –

internationalisation of the curriculum was a way to add a ‘Peace Education’ programme. In this case, the formal aim was to provide students with global perspectives of their discipline and give them a broader knowledge base for their future careers. This was addressed in a topical manner, through an academic course on political conflict resolution using case studies from around the world with Hebrew, not Arabic as the language of instruction. The informal aim of the programme however, was to develop Arab students’ integration into Jewish Hebrew-speaking society and strengthen their identity with respect to the larger Israeli Arab population.

IMAGINE THE POSSIBILITIES

The examples above illustrate, on a small scale, the potential that internationalisation of the curriculum can have as an agent for change in a country with many social tensions. Internationalisation can prove highly effective because it provides neutral grounds on which deeply ingrained sensitivities can be challenged and eventually softened.

Now imagine again. Imagine thousands of Israeli graduates, Jewish and Arab, who have systematically exercised, throughout the course of their undergraduate studies, an authentic capacity for co-existence. How would that shape the face of Israeli society? Higher education professionals must begin to recognise the social responsibility that comes with their job. Academics can and should educate for intercultural competencies and sensitivities. Peace takes practice and it begins in the classroom.

— AMIT MARANTZ-GAL

1. Tempus IRIS was a three-year project uniting 19 Israeli and European partners. The project’s objective is to promote international and intercultural policies, skills and culture in Israeli public academic colleges.

2. Leask, B. (2013). Internationalizing the curriculum in the disciplines: Imagining new possibilities. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 17(2), pp. 103–118.