

Project Inclusion

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Project Inclusion is a distance learning course designed by participants from the European Union (Greece, Sweden, and the Netherlands) and the United States through a three year grant awarded jointly by the EU and the US Department of Education through FIPSE (Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education). It was jointly written and received by James DeCaro and Ken Nash from NTID and Berth Danermark from Sweden. **(PP slide 1).**

FIPSE and the EU awarded this grant to encourage exploration of ways to bridge educational barriers between universities within these two entities in an increasingly global community. In our case, we are all interested in exploring and comparing approaches to education for people who are deaf across our four countries. **(PP slide 2)**

Our ultimate goal is toward furthering equality of opportunity in education and society for deaf individuals within and beyond our individual borders **(PP slide 3)** through a course designed for deaf and hearing graduate students studying to work in the area of deaf education **(PP slide 4)**. Our goal is to challenge students to think broadly about education of deaf people, such that as future teachers and leaders in their field, they might be in a better position to thoughtfully participate in shaping national policies within their own countries **(PP slide 5)**.

We took as a beginning point, the following objectives for the course: **(PP slide 6)** identifying “universal” educational design principles if such exist, and exploring policies and programs that seemed effective in our different countries. We hope to expand the knowledge base and challenge the assumptions of all the participants; including both faculty and students.

As one example, the very first question that we all are exploring, that is, “What does ‘inclusion’ mean within each country?” **(PP slide 7)** In the United States the word has come to have a specific programmatic meaning relating to a policy of educating deaf students entirely within classes of hearing students. As such it has led to great controversies. However, if we can challenge ourselves to think of the word “inclusion” **not as the name of a specific approach but broadly**, that is, as a concept of “what approach to education best allows deaf people to be included (whatever that means) for an equal education and equality in society?”, then we have opened up our minds to alternative approaches. Our central question then is “What are the implications of educational practice and policy for inclusion of deaf individuals in society?” **(PP slide 8)**

The course explores deaf education from the following perspectives: **(PP slide 9)**- diversity, human rights, language, politics, social history, and family through a process of **(PP slide 10)** comparison, contrast, analyzing, and making recommendations regarding the educational policies of the participating countries. Lets briefly look at the model we designed between us for relating these diverse elements. **(PP slide 11-12)** After much discussion we came to feel as a group that two elements were foundational to any such study: one is the often ignored diversity of deaf individuals within any country, which includes diversity of language, of gender, race, SES, history among many others, and the other is the fundamental Human Rights as laid out in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. These comprise the background to any discussion, and we begin the course with a unit on each one. Secondly we identified 4 factors which influence and inform educational practice and policy in any given country, language, social history, politics, and family. We focus upon the practice of schooling. Students read essays posted from faculty in each country regarding each topic. Through comparison and contrast analysis, we hope to identify the variety of approaches to inclusion of deaf persons through educational practice and to understand how each approach derives from and is related to the 4 factors which influence them. In the end our goal for students is to take away ideas with them for how they can improve educational practice and policy in their country and to have these in the form of concrete plans.

Course structure

That is the overall course description and model – now how are we achieving this?

This course was designed over the course of the first year of the grant, by email, through conference calls, and at three face-to-face meetings between all faculty participants – one in the United States, one in Sweden, and one in Denmark. In the end we designed a course with two components: a distance learning component **(PP slide 13)** and a face-to-face, two week capstone experience **(PP slide 14)**. One of the first challenges was to determine how to bridge the language differences. The decision was made to offer the course in written English in the distance learning portion **(PP slide 15)** since English was the only language studied and known within all the participating countries. However for the capstone portion, being held in July, 2001 here in Rochester for the first year, we will use a combination of English and the sign languages of each participating country. Before moving on I want to recognize the work of the development team members **(PP slide 16)** from all four countries who together have learned a great deal and combined a wealth of knowledge and expertise to create this program.

We have just begun the first course offering this year. We have a total of 20 students enrolled (6 from NTID, 4 from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, 3 from Greece, 4 from Sweden, one from the Netherlands and one from Germany coming with the group from the Netherlands). Of these, a total of 6 all from Sweden or the United States, are either Deaf or Hard of Hearing, and use their respective sign languages. Interpreters for both American Sign Language and Swedish Sign Language will be an integral part of the entire two weeks.

Course structure and dialogue on Blackboard

Lets start by looking at the overall setup – we have *announcements* that are arranged such that a participant can view new announcements, new over the past 7 days, and so on including all announcements posted.

Faculty information includes a photo of each faculty member and the pertinent academic contact information. The *communication* system allows us to communicate with various groupings or individuals. For example here, we can “select groups”, then pick one, for example the NTID faculty and students, and after adding the heading and the message we can send it to ourselves if we wish, add attachments, and submit. Note, Blackboard does not save anything itself so we cannot start a message and finish it later.

If we go to the *groups* button we can carry out group discussions which are not open to anyone outside the group. For example lets go the NTID faculty and student group and take a look. Within this area we can see the list of all group members and we can participate in the discussion board where students have posted essays each week. An essay posting begins a new thread and when it is opened, others can read it and reply to add to the thread. When finished, “ok” takes the student back. If a submission has not been read it will show up in yellow in the list.

External Links leads us to a variety of interesting and related websites which may be useful to any or all of the students including such things as the Deaf Web Page of resources, and a website with information about the European Union.

So far have not needed to use the *user tools* such as dropbox, grade viewing, address book, and the calendar. Likewise we are not using the *virtual classroom* for simultaneous chats – in large part because of the time zones differences between countries which makes it difficult to establish a chat time!

Lets go now to the meat of the course. We’ll start with the *syllabus*. You can see it is set up so that each country’s syllabus is posted, the schedule and events of the two week capstone, and a survey for each student to take. The survey currently does not allow us to identify individuals’ answers which is a limitation that we would like to find a way around later.

The *course materials* are organized by EU and USA, and subdivided within the EU into each country. Each student in each country reads approximately 20 pages of text regarding that topic for each unit, making approximately 80 pages of reading per unit. Then they go to the assignment. Remember students from other countries are using English, their second, third, or even fourth language so the amount of reading is significant. Deaf students from the US may also be using their second language and encounter similar challenges.

Now lets move to one of the most interesting spots in the course, the *Discussion Board*. As before, students post comments within each unit heading and either begin a new thread to reply to continue a conversation on one topic. A student can start a new thread by clicking on “add new thread”. There have been some fascinating discussions and I’d like to show you a glimpse of the interaction that has been going on. Lets go to the Language unit as an example – and get into the technology discussion. Here is the first question about technology, from Heather, which says in summary, a friend said there was no point in learning ASL because technology would soon manage to interpret automatically. Sangeeta from Sweden , after some discussion, asks for the opinion of a deaf person and Nina of the United States responds regarding the limitations of using the technologies so far because of the difficulties of “reading” feelings and emotions through typed English. She calls for more advanced technology that will allow a deaf person to sign to another. Greg then points out that it existed before at NTID and discusses the economics and politics that are involved. In other discussions students and faculty from several different countries have joined in – for example a discussion about free education and the necessity to work in some countries, or

another discussion about human rights, and another about whether deaf students always have or take extra time to complete an educational program (required extra 2 years in Sweden for example) and the local rationales for those decisions.

I think this is all we have time to browse through but lets turn to one other topic before finishing up the presentation.

Discoveries, dilemmas, and solutions

The process of developing , setting up, and delivering this course, which is ongoing right now, has been a sometimes frustrating, but fascinating learning experience already for us all. Let me give you some examples. We can roughly divide examples into two categories: logistics; and language, culture, and politics.

Logistics:

Some of the challenges we faced early on were structural. Differing criteria between universities and countries for assigning credit posed challenges to equating the numbers of credits. The RIT library, set up to give access to RIT students to the resources online, had to figure out how to allow others to access those resources. Some countries begin their courses in a semester system, some take only one course at a time in an intensive short block, and others began the course in March or April according to their university structure. We originally meant to have all groups studying the same unit at the same time but it quickly became apparent that this was impossible so we set up the course so that whenever students were studying a unit they would go ahead and post comments and discussions. The faculty of each country agreed to go online at least once a week to respond to statements and comments even if they were not currently teaching. Some universities had very strict regulations regarding courses and others did not.

There was also the very difficult issue of differing availability of resources – money, numbers of staff to support the project, numbers of faculty, equipment, and the like. The United States team consists of six development faculty as well as two directors, easy availability of computers, printers, scanners, graduate students and/or support staff to take care of collection of literature and even some of the writing. As a result, the task was approached such that the units were divided up and each faculty member wrote one unit complete with references, of approximately 20 pages each. In contrast, in Sweden there were two faculty available to do all the units, and in Greece only one. The faculty member in the Netherlands did not have email access for some time and it was therefore very difficult to maintain communication. None of the other countries had the large support staff that the United States has. Therefore the task was altered such that the expectation was that they would pull together what they could from already existing documents and references. Some of the submissions do not neatly “fit” the unit categories that were decided upon – that is language, social history, politics, and family, but perhaps touched upon all of those topics within the scope of a single existing paper.

Language, culture, and politics

Another area of differences could be considered cultural and political. For example expectations with regard to the speed of reply to email differ. Americans tend to expect a very quick turnaround – minimally within 24 hours, however members of the other countries felt no such compulsion, not because they are lazy, but because of a different sense of what is urgent. Educationally, the American approach is very structured with controls built in such as frequent testing and very

specific homework assignments, while several of the European countries stress the seminar approach to graduate education in which students are expected to read materials on their own and come to a seminar prepared to discuss in great depth the material. There might be one single, important and thoughtful test at the end of the course.

Cultures differ in their values and understandings of what is critical. For example in the United States individuality, rights and laws, and independence are highly valued and influence the form of education. In Sweden consensus, the responsibility of every member of society to contribute to the welfare of others for overall equality, and the “middle way” between private and government management as a route to individual freedom and security are highly valued. In Greece, the very long and difficult history of wars and invasions ending really only in 1974 has meant facing difficulties that the other countries have not, and the strong determination to preserve the Greek culture and heritage regardless. In the Netherlands, freedom of choice is highly valued and has led to an educational system where 65% of the schools are privately established to fit the perspectives of the founders. Each school can teach what they want although they have to meet some national standards. Additionally research and technology are highly stressed along with widespread collaboration between entities with varied strengths.

Our assumptions are all challenged. For example today I met with the two students whom I am mentoring and the comment was made that she used to believe that the USA was absolutely tops in terms of technology and yet now was amazed and envious of the large variety of adaptive technologies invented and used in the other countries – for example “mobile interpreting” which allows a deaf individual to contact an interpreter at any time during a conversation with a hearing person and using a small device, receive communication assistance for the conversation, and videoconferencing for tutoring deaf students in place of home visits to rural areas.

Sensitivity to the uneven power relations between the United States and the three countries was an absolute requirement for the large American team, particularly given our emphasis upon speed and efficiency. We had to be very careful not to dominate every discussion and decision. The example cited earlier about the units that we wrote, and the modifications that had to be made to allow the European partners to participate was one case in point which required careful listening to one another at all times and balancing. The issue of language use is another example – even though it made sense to use English as the written language of communication, it gives the American faculty and students a strong advantage and has made it more difficult for those from other countries to participate equally on the discussion board.

Finally, we had and are continuing to have deep discussions regarding the meaning of terminology such as “inclusion”. Already we can begin to understand how Swedish educators view the best way to include deaf people is to have a completely bilingual approach using Swedish Sign Language for face to face communication and written and reading Swedish for other communication, because in that way a deaf person has the full advantage of learning from accessible communication and the like. The Netherlands appears to approach inclusion in a technological and scientific fashion with the same goal. The United States has focused upon mainstreamed education with support services of multitude sorts. As yet I am not clear on the characteristics of the Greek approach but will be developing a clearer sense of all through the interaction on Blackboard and later, the capping experience.

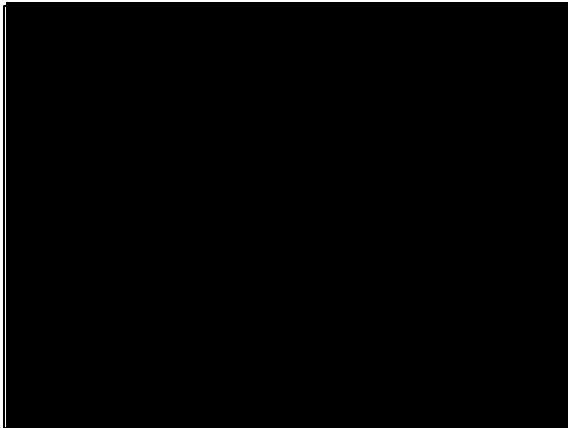
In summary, this experiment, while just begun, has already created enormous insights and questions for all of us. The use of Blackboard, which is relatively easy to use and learn

although somewhat limiting in its options, is allowing us to deal with some of the complexities of cross-cultural education in a fascinating way and is building a strong background for our two week personal interactions coming up.

Thank you very much .

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**EU/USA Joint Consortia for Cooperation
in
Higher Education and Vocational Education**

by: Mudgett-DeCaro, P., Nash, K. & Foster S.
<http://www.rit.edu/inclusion>

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Instructional Approach:

First ever comparative course on education of deaf people in:

- Greece
- Holland
- Sweden
- USA

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Ultimate Goal:

- Help realize equality of opportunity in education and society for people who are deaf.

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Target Population:

- Students preparing to work with deaf pupils in participant countries.

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Enabling Goal:

- Prepare teachers and service providers to participate in shaping inclusive national policies on deaf education.

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Objectives:

- Identify “universal” design principles,
- Articulate effective policies, and
- Identify practical programs.

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Central Question #1:

What does inclusion, taken broadly, mean within different countries?

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Central Question #2:

What are the implications of educational practice and policy for inclusion of deaf individuals in society?

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Expected Outcomes:

Students will compare deaf education practices in context:

- Diversity
- Human Rights
- Language
- Politics
- Social History
- Family

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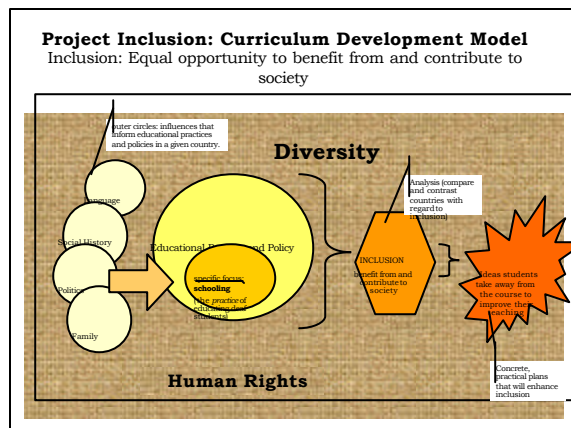
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Expected Outcome:

Multinational student teams will:

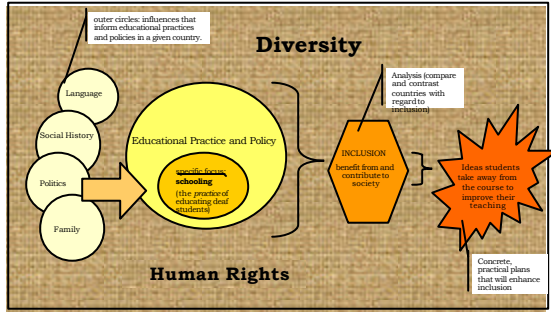
- compare,
- contrast,
- analyze, and
- make recommendations

regarding policies and programs of each country.



Project Inclusion: Curriculum Development Model

Inclusion: Equal opportunity to benefit from and contribute to society



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Instructional Approach:
Course delivered asynchronously using web technology (Blackboard).

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Instructional Approach:
Course capped by a two week intensive session.

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Instructional Approach:
Course delivered in English and the sign languages of participant countries.

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