



## A multicultural approach to information studies education at UC

In embracing the exciting opportunities for multicultural education in the information sector, it is essential to be aware of the resulting cultural complexities. Designing and offering an online educational environment to multiple cultures requires strategies beyond specifics, such as the use of language. It requires the construction of a flexible, pluralistic, respectful, and responsive online 'classroom'. Multiculturalism has been an important issue in the development of the University of Canberra's new Masters degree in Information Studies, which is being taught for the first time in 2009. The new course has been purposely developed to use an online environment unencumbered by print material, and to be available to students on a global basis.

The technologies of the internet are now robust and mature for online education. There may still be bandwidth issues in some countries but access to the internet by prospective students is sufficiently widespread for this medium to be viable for education on a global scale. Nonetheless, having the available technology, putting materials online, and requiring interaction are not in themselves enough to teach students from many different cultures effectively. The online learning environment must be crafted to suit a multicultural audience.

There are numerous specific strategies that can and must be undertaken in offering any online course that is available to people of different cultures. Consideration of the user interface of the online teaching 'space' is paramount. Use of colour, metaphor, and graphics should be examined for any lack of cultural inclusivity. Language used throughout all teaching materials and interactions should demonstrate an awareness of the multicultural audience. Knowing that English is a second language for some students requires any use of humour, acronyms, and hackneyed phrases to be examined with great care. Case studies, examples, and assignment questions can be inclusive of cultures other than an Australian one.

However, many of these specific strategies prove more useful when designing for known cultural settings, in which material can be embedded in local context, than they are for the global educational opportunities that UC is offering in information studies. In the latter case, the target student group is unknown, so we must achieve multiculturalism that is not located in a known or restricted context. Nonetheless, the need for contextualisation remains and is achieved by designing some learning activities to allow all students to implement them in their local cultural context. Variations in teaching styles allow students to work together and individually. Approaches to teaching allow for strategies involving the social construction of knowledge as well as more instructive methods giving students from varying cultural educational backgrounds an experience of familiarity.

Gone, one hopes, are the days when 'distance education' meant the delivery of slabs of learning material and some assignment topics. The interactivity offered by learning management systems such as UC's Moodle provides the space for teachers and students to look critically together at key learning resources, examine case studies, and apply new concepts to a variety of contexts. There is an opportunity to recognise and so address aspects such as contextual difference, not to mention the cultural bias in students' readings.

In building an online learning community and developing a global conversation, student-to-student interactions are frequent. Our students are given the cultural confidence to have a voice in our online learning spaces and are often self regulating – this

example of an international student's posting to a discussion forum demonstrates this point.

"Since some of us are from outside Australia, may I request you all to spell out abbreviations (Australian locations or names etc.) that we may not be aware of? Thanks for your understanding!"

Our local students are prone to introducing their role at the ABS or ATO (Australian Bureau of Statistics or Australian Tax Office) and they are called to account!

Most importantly in our teaching, we aim to build a community of open and respectful communication where cultural issues and identities can be made explicit and enrich the overall learning experience. For all students and teachers it will be an opportunity to step outside their cultural norms and certainties and consider multiple global perspectives. We all share in the chance to learn what is happening in the field of information studies in other countries and we prepare our graduates for work in a networked global society.

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## Multicultural literature in Australia and the AustLit database

Did you know that among the earliest of Australia's multicultural writers is the Spanish-born Rudesindo Salvado, whose memoir, *Memorie Storiche dell'Australia*, was published in Italy in 1851? Salvado's book, though perhaps not well-known, is held in its English translation by at least fifty Australian libraries. Better known is *The Eureka Stockade*, published in Melbourne in 1855 by Italian-born Raffaello Carboni, another of Australia's multicultural writers. The AustLit database's Australian Multicultural Writers subset (<http://www.austlit.edu.au/specialistDatasets/MW>) lists more than 3 000 writers who have identified as having cultural backgrounds other than Anglo-Celtic, and whose works have been published from the early 1800s to the present day, in both English and in over fifty other languages.

In 2007 I joined the AustLit research team, under the direction of Professor Wenche Ommundsen at the University of Wollongong, with responsibility for augmenting records for the Multicultural Writers subset and keeping the database up-to-date with publications of multicultural writing. I'd like to provide an overview of some of the important additions to the subset, with examples of how the database can enrich research outcomes.

Australian literature is produced in numerous languages in addition to English and AustLit has extensive coverage of materials published in, for example, Greek, Italian, and Chinese (with over 1000, 945, and 884 works respectively). The first Greek publications in Australia date from the 1910s, Italian (with the exception of Salvado's text mentioned above) from the 1920s, while the Chinese language material recorded by AustLit dates (with a few exceptions) from the early 1980s. Similarly, Spanish language literary publications (again, with a handful of exceptions) begin to appear in Australia in the 1980s, following the arrival of refugees fleeing violence in Latin America. Spanish language poetry, short stories, autobiographies, and articles have been a focus area of my research and AustLit now has records for over 700 Spanish language works. Multiple-author Spanish