



Faculty of Applied Languages, Commerce and Communication
(UFR LACC)

CASE STUDY *LACCouleur Noire*:

How could Universities mesh research at initial training level with research at continuing education level? Reflections on an experiment in our faculty on the theme of diversity

1. Project summary

LACCouleur Noire possesses a twofold dimension, 1) examine the possibility of meshing University research activities with vocational training, both at initial education and at continuing education levels, 2) examine how research activities developed at University level can be used regionally or locally to further the objectives of lifelong learning education and create regional and local dynamics on a given territory through economic, social and cultural developments. The experiment described in the following pages can thus be seen as the first step towards the development of a Master's programme on the question of diversity within the context of a European definition of citizenship.

2. Main questions

This case study rests on a series of questions and sub-questions that we have tried to address while working on the project.

- ✓ Can we come to a collective understanding of diversity at University level? To what extent is the definition of diversity by higher education institutions linked to its national settings, but also with its regional and local settings?

If the initial part of the project rested on discussions on the *BeFlex* + conception of diversity in University Lifelong Learning (ULL) - diversity of learners, diversity of teaching methods, social and human diversity, and on the position of our institution on lifelong learning, it soon became clear that any definition of diversity had also to do with territorial diversity when we reflected on the role and location of our home University in its regional setting.

Located in the centre of France's *Massif Central*, the Auvergne region is characterized by having a population which is both small and relatively evenly spread throughout the

region, even though it tends now to concentrate in urban areas (including Clermont-Ferrand). Blaise Pascal University is situated in a region currently facing two contradictory evolutions, 1) a falling population and a renewal of the workforce, 2) a “reduced activity because of a growing number of businesses for sale and the need for restructuring and for new businesses in the sectors of the future”^a. In order to meet these challenges, the appeal of the Auvergne region, the European Commission noted, needs to be boosted by action in the areas of innovation, knowledge-based economy, competitiveness, traditional economic activities, employment and sustainable development^b. To overcome such obstacles, the *Conseil régional* (or Regional council in English) has recently launched a strategy to bring high-speed Internet access to all in the region.

Having this territorial dimension in mind, we began to look for partners willing to work with us on a definition of diversity, trying to link continuing education and the research activities that we had initially began on diversity. The advantageous position that we had regarding the “diversity” theme arose from the fact that our research group, *Communication et Solidarité* (Communication and Solidarity in English), had been working on diversity and social bonding in European societies (see section 2). Through numerous contacts with state and cultural institutions - *Riom Communauté* (a Community council in English), the French Justice department, Riom Public library and the cultural services of Blaise Pascal University, we have tried to set up a strategy where we could further the aims of LLL through partnerships and various actions, *i.e.* cultural events such as conferences for the general population in smaller towns of the Auvergne region, and effective training for prisoners. The underlying idea was to target our actions towards people who did not have normal or regular access to knowledge or to people who encountered difficulties of access in their daily lives to education and culture despite public policies (the French expression in use is *publics empêchés*). In that sense, this strong and committed element of the project followed the EU education and training policy to allow people to participate fully in society. Unfortunately, we were soon faced with a series of difficulties and had to drop our idea to work with inmates on a cultural project leading to forms of re-socialization and educational training. We managed to cling to the other idea, the work with public libraries to promote wider access to culture and participation in cultural activities, and moved on with our objective to link research and the territorial dimension in order to use it as a possible case study to show how a research experiment on the ground could be initiated and developed for future students.

- ✓ How can research activities on diversity at University level further research on diversity at European level? When does the LLL dimension come in? How can research activities set up by learners engaged in lifelong learning have an impact on researches on diversity in general? And how could initial education and continuing education be linked through research on a similar theme? How could the European dimension be inserted in the whole project?

Our research group focuses on the re-making of social ties in pluricultural and democratic societies, also known as "communication societies". Over the last two years, the notion of diversity in contemporary societies was studied using black as the colour of sensitivity, a study from the perspective of danger and transgression on diversity. Leading to the publication of two books, this research has helped to further research on the notion of diversity and citizenship and has fed into teaching at faculty level^c. The question quickly then became: how could we bring together, on the same notion of diversity, current university research and research done by continuing education learners?

We have not found any real example where research and continuing education mingled to such an extent that learners engaged in continuing education were working on a true research project, much in the same way as students at initial training level. From then on, we have thus endeavoured to work at Master's level. Having in our Faculty a Master's programme with a human resources dimension, we have decided to work on its curriculum to tailor it for learners at continuing education level. With our initial questions still in mind, we have tried to develop that Master's programme in two phases. Much of the first part of our strategy was devoted to map the needs of the local/regional area on the theme of diversity, looking both at possible institutional partners and private companies having an interest in such a notion in the more general context of human resources management. To that end, we distributed a series of questionnaires to have a clearer idea of their needs but also to see how partnerships could be set up between those institutions and our Faculty to further the aims of LLL. The second phase, currently in progress, focuses on the development of tailored contents for continuing education learners with continuous exchanges with partners, the setting up of a prospective strategy to look for more partners at regional level, and the development of the curriculum around educational ICT.

3. Conclusion and future development

Initially resting on two recommendations of the *BeFlex* + project ("Exploring Diversity in ULLL" and "Regional Collaboration and Partnership in ULLL"), both topics being

examined at the level of our region (the Auvergne region), this case study has shown that the notion of diversity encompasses a wider range of meanings, *i.e.* social and human diversity, diversity of learners, diversity of teaching methods, but also territorial diversity, while the idea of local/regional collaborations and partnerships refers to another core element of the project to the extent that the University tries to take full account of its surrounding area. Two other topics of the ULLL definition are also worth mentioning here since they are either used as a useful tool to assess the validity of the project (“Recognition of Prior Learning) and its formal implementation, or as a direction to promote further significant changes in ULLL at university level (“Implementing Institutional Change in ULLL”). Another key feature of our project is that it truly helps the move from University Lifelong Learning (LLL) to Lifelong Learning University - staff and students learning from their own experience and from people and activities outside the university, all the more when a European dimension is attached to the project.

We are currently looking for partner institutions interested in developing with us that Master’s programme at European level. Around the concept of a shared curriculum on the basis of the Master’s programme that we have been working on, the idea is twofold: to see how that Master’s programme is implemented with other partner universities (both in terms of contents and approaches) and how learners make the different dimensions their own. The underlying idea is also to develop a network of LLL Universities around that programme at Master’s level, first to exchange on LLL (at both levels, learners and teachers alike) but also to further research on the theme of diversity at European level.

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^a European Commission, Regional Policy – Inforegio, http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/country/prordn/details_new.cfm?gv_PAY=FR&gv_reg=ALL&gv_PGM=1123&gv_defL=7&LAN=7, accessed 15 May 2011.

^b *Ibid.*

^c Over the period 2010-2012, using multidisciplinary and intercultural approaches, this project has led to the publication of a collective book on black in two volumes under the direction of Prof. E. Agbessi. This project also led to the organisation of two international conferences, a first entitled “diversity and innovation in the workplace” (30 Nov. to 2 Dec. 2011) in Clermont-Ferrand (France), a second in Sousse, Tunisia, on “Interculturality in the construction and deconstruction of the color black” (22 – 24 Feb. 2012).