# LACE, physical and virtual networking for an international master in literature and culture.

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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. The network is defending a multilingual and cross-cultural approach that reflects the cooperation between institutions from diverse regions of Europe. Universities involved in this project are: Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Aarhus University, Tartu University, Lisbon University, Universidad de Granada, University of Bologna and K.U.Leuven.

As 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. Besides that, we want to facilitate these exchanges by using virtual mobility, in addition to the well established physical mobility. This international online support is used for our Erasmus students as well as for students who are going abroad for an internship. By the use of ICT, students and teachers not only develop new skills, but also a flexible attitude which is required while we give full technical support to work from a distance through a Moodle platform, online library access, reference management tools and real-time communication such as Skype. In this way international work experience in gained while a student doesn't even have to leave his home. We truly believe that this approach explores all possibilities in developing our LACE network to the fullest.

**Keywords**: Networked curricula, Virtual Mobility, Internationalization, Moodle

## 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 others 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's 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 programmes 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.

### *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 place 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 37 000 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 circa 3400 students in its 13 basic academic programmes and 15 advanced programmes [2]. In Leuven there are three master programmes 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 CS/Media 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 programme 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].

### 1.3 Four step approach

The partners of LACE are progressive universities, with a long-term planning. Our biggest ambition is to start an Erasmus Mundus to attract more foreign students. In this common cooperation and mobility programme 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. To make this all 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 programme, 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.

#### *1.3.1 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. In the other way, 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 collaborating with them is experienced. A third and very important advantage is that it helps as well to start building the common programme of step 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 could attract already over 20 students from all over the world. They can also count on special guidance for their thesis and internship.

### *1.3.2 The LACE Joint Course on Culture and Change in Europe*

Starting from the academic year 2011-2012 the LACE partnership developed a full 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” like '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.

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 Smartboard would be an ideal solution for virtual classrooms. 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, d*ebate, 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.

### *1.3.3 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 programme, whose core business will follow the lines of our mission statement. This common programme 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 programme. Moreover, we would like also to reward students who take part in this common

programme (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 programme 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.

### *1.3.4 Erasmus Mundus*

Step three finally will consist of the Erasmus Mundus application, the international counterpart of the Erasmus programme, we are willing to do in 2012, which will be based on our common programme. 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 programme will be organized and implemented, but for the moment everything is still open for discussion.

## 1.4 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 European 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 European 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 "European" 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.

# 2 VIRTUAL LACE

An international master like LACE can only be successful through integral technological support, where both ODL techniques as more general social software tools are implemented. These technologies have already proven to be of high added value for Erasmus exchange programmes,

where they have helped us to keep contact with students studying abroad. In the context of LACE we want to capitalize on his experience while following a more systematic approach.

## 2.1 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.

## 2.2 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.

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.

### 2.3 Video facilities and weblectures

For LACE, both full-blown videoconferencing and web-based video-communication tools are used. For the course on Film and Literature, videoconferences are held involving student groups from Leuven and Granada, so that they can learn to know each other and pair for paper groups. The videoconferencing hub also supports MSN and Skype link-ups for maximal flexibility.

LACE also provides in a video streaming server VideoLab [16] used to publish the online web lectures, in particular those of the joint course.

### 2.4 Off-the-shelf communication tools

To support mobile or "off-shore" students does not always require investment in heavy technological infrastructure. For our Erasmus exchange students, we like many other universities soon discovered the ease of use of tools like Skype to keep in contact with students who are studying abroad. A teaching assistant is always reachable through Skype for the students, so that their administrative and other problems can be followed up swiftly. We also noticed that communication through mail often adds to the stress of the stay abroad, due to the delay between answers and sometimes misunderstandings that arise from the email messages. By using Skype, students know that someone familiar can be reached easily in direct contact to solve problems, e.g. regarding housing.

Direct video communication over the internet also allows students abroad to participate in the ongoing academic life of their class at home. More in particular, since they mostly still have to complete their master thesis while staying a semester abroad, they can participate in the regular exercises that support thesis writing, like in our case two short presentations of the work in progress. This is done by contacting the dissertation supervisor through Skype. The student sends his PowerPoint presentation beforehand.

### 2.5 The LACE Dictionary

This is an envisioned and yet to realize multilingual Wiki that lists terminology specific to LACE. In the first place it contains Bologna higher education terminology, to make it easier for students to understand the administrative language at the destination university. For this, links are provided to existing resources for Erasmus exchange.

Second, a concise “Cultural Studies lexicon” will be provided based on existing handbooks, helping students to understand core notions in different European Languages.

Third, terminology of specific domains at the core of LACE will be developed with the cooperation of participating students.

### 2.6 The LACE Bookshelf

The LACE bookshelf holds publications by participating staff. We use the open environment “The Library Thing” for this [17]. The advantage is that the students get an overview of the collected works of the involved staff in the network, and this way can grow a better understanding about the teaching. It can also help them to choose the right Erasmus destination, to join professors that are most suited to give guidance to their thesis research.

One of the key enabling factors for a project such as LACE is the fact that university libraries have undergone a tremendous transformation in the past decades [18]. The Digital Library, as it is a reality in Leuven, Groningen, Aarhus and other partners, enables the students to work on their own library collections from their stay abroad. In our current experience with both co-teaching (Film and Literature) as well as with the student exchange (Erasmus), the Digital Library has proven to be a common background to work against, literally integrating over the internet decades of different and locally coloured collection traditions. Skilled students can compare library holdings at their home and distant university and see for complementarities of scope or literary tradition. This of course is important in LACE, where Literature and Culture, the notions of identity and change, are studied in depth but at the same time often in a comparatist setting.

### 2.7 Support beyond the course context

The technological framework is not just there to provide course support or support online and distance learning. It is meant to enable teacher and student mobility within LACE as such. In particular, through the web-portal it is possible to support the stay of students abroad in very innovative ways. In most of the degrees involved in LACE, there is a requirement to take an

apprenticeship. This is a very crucial part of the education into Cultural Studies. For most students this poses some organizational problems: a Leuven student e.g. has to do 240 hours in an apprentice position. The student can choose his own apprentice place, (we provide a very comprehensive list of possible employers, both locally in Belgium or abroad in the LACE network). But planning of such an apprenticeship together with a semester abroad proves difficult.

## 3 CONCLUSION: LACE AS A NETWORKED CURRICULUM

As has been detailed in this paper, LACE is a typical initiative in the Post-Bologna era, where Master degrees are conceived in a European, internationalized context. Internationalization, we have argued, is not a goal in itself but has become an intrinsic necessity for the kind of Master programmes that we want to offer our students. In the pedagogical concept on which the LACE network is based, Open Policies lie at the core of the educational project we want to share with the students. These policies also set the boundaries for the technological framework chosen. In the effort of the LACE partnership towards double and joint degrees preparing for Erasmus Mundus and a true multi-partner international Master programme, ICT technology proves to be the enabling factor, at different levels:

- Transparent information for participating students from the LACE consortium and for possibly interested students in other institutions through a website
- Open courses that allow profiling of institutions as well as professors within the partnership, mainstreaming of contents and insights in a regional context and the possibility to reach out to stakeholder communities, and finally provision of inherent quality control due to the constraints and incentives of open publishing
- An interactive space that allows students at home and abroad to interact with each other, the staff and the course contents in a seamless way, and which also allows supporting students at a distance in all aspects of their study path.

We described in detail the four-step approach to strengthen the network, where we started with streamlining the Erasmus exchanges of students and professors through the network. In a second step, a joint course is developed, where modules are provided by the different participating institutions under the theme “Literature and Change in Europe”. This offers students already an insight in the strengths and complementarity of the network. It also will form the basis of a common core curriculum, which will allow the development of a double and later joint degree. Finally, our aim is to obtain an Erasmus Mundus status. As such, the LACE venture in our view is typical for a prudent roadmap that many master programmes in Europe could take in their quest for sustainable internationalization. The fact that the individual study programmes of the partners are already witnessing increased participation by international students is testimony of the validity of this approach.

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