Observations of students, particularly his international contingent, prompted Geoff Plimmer to review his own teaching and ways he could encourage them to improve their performance.

“I saw some of the international students as demotivated, isolated, with numerous cultural and language barriers to get through. It made me think about my teaching.”

Conversations with international students suggested that not only was there value in assisting their engagement and integration, but also in showing their New Zealand contemporaries that their overseas colleagues had capabilities and experiences that were valuable.

“I wanted to bring more interactivity into the curriculum - something that widened the forms of delivery and could bring the class together with a shared experience. After twenty minutes I’m pretty sick of Power Pointing, and I think the students are too.”

Geoff had previously undertaken an ExcelL course and felt it was the right tool, saying the ExcelL-based teaching and learning interventions provided a means of teaching cultural difference that otherwise would have remained empty phrases. Its behavioural basis complements, contrasts and brings to life the more cognitive concepts we usually teach.

“I don’t have a lot of time for gimmicks or in introducing anything that conveys low standards. So I made sure I tied this process very clearly to the literature for our studies on gender, minorities and culture as part of the course on remuneration and performance management. If it’s academically robust, it’s okay to widen the delivery.

“I hate asking people to do role plays because I hate doing them myself, but having Karen Commons and Xiaodan Gao help take the class was an enormous source of comfort.”

Role plays included “asking for a pay rise” and “saying no” and the aim was to show gender and cultural differences in how these were negotiated. Geoff felt that the first time these ExcelL elements were undertaken it did help build connections between class members and linked theory to

If I can get just a couple to go from a B- to a B or B+ and have a bit more presence, I call that a win.
practice, but he was not entirely satisfied. Building on feedback, the session was run again in a following trimester – where the results were more successful.

“I introduced this early in the course. Week 3 or 4. The second time we had fewer role-play examples (in response to feedback) and I got a lot out of it and so did the students.”

The exercises demonstrated significant differences in approach even between cultures that were supposedly similar. Some cultural differences had been in line with the literature but student interest was piqued when these differences were not always held at an individual level, and the ‘bandwidth’ of the theories to explain what is happening is pretty limited.

“I’d love to say it created a rainbow of ethnicity and happiness, but I’m not sure that’s the case. The benefits are that it does connect the class to each other and to me. It certainly brings the course content to life and shows the Kiwi students that New Zealand is as uniquely weird as anywhere else.

“I’m also not sure it leads to better, more sophisticated assignments. But you might grab a couple of students who may have been vulnerable. If I can get just a couple to go from a B- to a B or B+ and have a bit more presence, I call that a win. I certainly have a lot more contact with international students now than in the past, and they themselves have a legitimated cultural platform from which to talk to other students in tutorials, which boosts their confidence and performance.”