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Schlagworte: intercultural learning; intercultural reflexivity; reflexivity; virtual internationalization

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Promoting Intercultural Reflexivity and Learning in Virtual International Learning Environments – Theoretical Suggestions and Didactical Implications

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Abstract

The implementation of virtual international courses in teacher education is often associated with the claim to promote students' intercultural learning. Based on a closer examination of the constructs of "culture" and "(inter)cultural learning", this article argues that virtual international courses do not automatically lead to intercultural learning and reflexivity. Based on a theoretical analysis, didactic implications are presented that can promote intercultural learning in the context of virtual international courses.

Keywords: intercultural learning, intercultural reflexivity, reflexivity, virtual internationalization

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1 Introduction

Internationalization has become a core topic of higher education. Compared to other courses of study, teacher education has a strong local focus, as its genuine task is to qualify future teachers for specific national contexts (Leutwyler et al., 2017, pp. 66–67). However, as a result of globalization, increasing migration and the multiculturalism of societies, teachers need a "global" understanding, international experience and intercultural skills in order to be able to deal with diversity in the classroom and serve as role models. In this context it is interesting to examine how pedagogical approaches can

help to deal with the growing socio-cultural complexity in education. Research on teacher education shows that the attitudes that prospective teachers bring with them are very static. In order to achieve change, these must be actively addressed, e.g. by reflecting on new experiences with regard to diversity and inclusion in teacher education (e.g. Heinrich et al., 2013). It can be deduced from this that there is a need for increased forms of internationalization and international and intercultural exchange in teacher education. In recent years, virtual forms of internationalization have become increasingly important. However, this raises the question of whether these are a suitable format for promoting intercultural learning among students. This is where the following article takes up. This paper focuses on the question of how virtual international learning environments need to be designed to promote intercultural reflexivity and intercultural learning. To answer this question, the paper discusses the terms “culture” (section 2) and (inter)cultural learning (section 3) and emphasizes the central importance of experience and reflexivity (section 4) as well as (physical and virtual) international exchange for intercultural learning. It concludes with didactic implications (section 6) and a brief summary (section 7).

2 Culture

In order to analyze the prerequisites for intercultural learning, it is first important to analyze what culture is. In a general understanding of the term, “culture” can be understood as the opposite of “nature”. In this sense, culture comprises all products, forms of production, lifestyles, behaviors and leading ideas of a community that are formed in a collective context of meaning (Arnold & Schüßler, 1998, p. 3; Fuchs, 2008, p. 12). For the respective community, culture assumes many important functions: it establishes rules and standards that are necessary for a meaningful life in the community and thus also creates expectations. These expectations facilitate living together, because they make behavior, interactions, reactions and other activities predictable. Consequently, the members of a community receive orientation through the shared culture. This counteracts permanent pressure to make decisions and creates commitment. In this sense, culture fulfills an important orientation function that simplifies and enables life in communities (Brück-Hübner, 2020, pp. 25–27; Kleber & Stein, 2001, p. 7; Lüddemann, 2010, pp. 13–16).

Cultures are complex. In addition to “visible” and “observable” elements (such as behavior, actions, words and body language), there are also parts of cultures that are difficult to access. These include, for example, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, values and much more (Kohls & Knight, 2007). The vitality of a culture is in tension between repetition and innovation: culture is directly tied to its practice. For a culture, only those components with practical relevance are of importance. In order to persist, the relevant practices have to be passed on and continued, but at the same time they should be adapted to new conditions and contexts. Practices that have become obsolete must be discarded (Brück-Hübner, 2020, pp. 26–27; Kleber & Stein, 2001, p. 9; Lüddemann, 2010, p. 14).

In summary, culture is a network of shared meanings and activities of a community. It defines rules and standards for living together and creates obligations and commitments. Culture, however, is not a monument but a dynamic, self-evolving construct. This leads to the question of how cultural learning occurs.

3 (Inter-)Cultural Learning

Members usually “grow” into the culture through active participation and processes of social and communicative practices. When people grow up in a culture, they are socialized accordingly. People usually unconsciously adopt the dominant ways of acting, expectations, traditions, beliefs, attitudes, habits and much more in their environment. Besides social participation, the communicative transfer of culture is very important for cultural learning (Brück-Hübner, 2020, pp. 26–27; Dewey, 2000/1919, pp. 19–21; Lüddemann, 2010, p. 14). In this context, media (e. g. spoken and body language, books, films and today also social media) play a central role. They serve to transmit, store and secure information and make it transferable to other people and situations (Reich et al., 2005, pp. 1–2). However, media are not an exact representation of reality. Symbols are used for the transmission of information, which are shaped by social, cultural and linguistic conventions and inevitably also contain omissions, values and individual interpretations (Hall, 1997, pp. 119–124). Culture is therefore always a matter of negotiation and is also influenced by (new) members.

People are often not aware of how much the culture in which they grow up shapes their thinking, attitudes and actions. This is due to the genuine function of culture: It is supposed to relieve us of the burden of living together and, in this sense, support us in not always having to reflect on, question and challenge everything (Brück-Hübner, 2020, pp. 25–26). However, when we meet people from other cultures, it can happen that our expectations are disappointed: unexpected actions, different communication habits and new symbol systems lead to experiences of strangeness (see e. g. Hall, 1997; Redecker, 2021).

And this is where intercultural learning comes within. The goal of intercultural learning is to impart knowledge and skills that enable learners not only to understand other cultures, but also to interact (successfully) with people from other cultures (Lane, 2012). For that it is important that not only the “visible” and “observable” elements are taught (e. g. the acquisition of a foreign language). Successful intercultural understanding also requires knowledge and insight into the “hidden” cultural backgrounds (see section 2). However, precisely these elements of a culture (values, expectations, beliefs, etc.) are often difficult to “explain” and “communicate”. In this article, the thesis is put forward that those elements of a culture can primarily be developed through processes of experience of intercultural exchange and their reflection – and thus, through learning processes that are most similar to “natural” cultural learning.

4 Experiences and Reflexivity as Key for Intercultural Learning

Culture shapes our thoughts and actions and therefore becomes visible above all in social practice. It is in social practice or exchange with people from other cultures that we become aware of certain differences in the first place. However, the perception of differences alone does not automatically lead to intercultural learning and thus to the promotion of intercultural understanding. Experiencing foreignness can also lead to stigmatization and discrimination, especially if the different cultures are not considered in the processes and one's own cultural values are used as an unshakeable norm. But how can such social processes of experiencing foreignness be used productively for learning?

Following Dewey (2000/1919, pp. 187–203), processes of experience consist of an active and a passive element: When we experience something, we act on something, we try something out, we make experiences (actively), but at the same time the subject acts back on us, we suffer the consequences of our actions, i. e. the change brought about by our actions acts back on us and thus brings about a change in us (passively). In order for a “meaningful” experience to be gathered, the active and passive elements of the experience have to be put in relation to each other by thinking. Dewey understands “thinking” in this context as seeing a problem, observing given facts, and drawing an obvious conclusion that must be worked out and tested by action. According to Dewey, it is only by experiencing the consequences of our actions, reflecting on them and testing the consequences that we gain experience and, as a result, learn.

Dewey consequently emphasizes that problems or disappointments of previous assumptions or expectations can activate learning processes. Mitgutsch (2009, pp. 184–187) agrees with this, emphasizing that experiences (disappointments, resistances and irritations) are indispensable for learning and expanding the horizon. He emphasizes that it is precisely through the failure of one's own expectations and ideas, as well as by disclosing gaps in knowledge and irritations, that new perspectives are opened up, which can lead to learning processes. However, in order to use these situations productively, a proactive attitude on the part of the individuals involved is necessary. It is not a matter of merely experiencing and “suffering” the situations, but rather of understanding them through processes of reflection based on action and experience, of striving for understanding, and of deriving consequences for one's own actions (Brück-Hübner, 2020, pp. 15–18; Dieckmann, 1994, pp. 102–108).

Transferred to the processes of intercultural learning, this means that intercultural learning has a learning potential through situations in which the actual (culturally shaped) expectations are disappointed by the counterpart and as a result disappointments, resistances or irritations occur. To unlock this potential, it is important to connect reflective processes that not only analyze the situation and identify the cause of the problem or irritation, but also derive actionable consequences that can be tested in new social or intercultural practices.

The analysis of what exactly initiated the problem or irritation is difficult, especially when deep cultural imprints implicitly influence the action, of which the actors are not aware. Here, communication – i. e. the mutual negotiation of the meaning of the situation and also the intentions and reasons behind a certain action – is essential. Through such intercultural communication processes, different ways of thinking and perspectives can be revealed and thus become “accessible”. In the process, not only the situation itself is reflected upon, but also one’s own culturally influenced viewpoint as well as the culturally influenced viewpoint of the counterpart. One example of this is “eye contact” during communication. While in some cultures it is considered impolite not to look the other person in the eye during a conversation, in other cultures it is an expression of respect. This can lead to misinterpretations of behavior if there is no exchange of different understandings

The understanding of intercultural learning, including a diversity of perspectives and a process of broaden horizons and in consequence an “detachment of the self” (Dewey, 2000/1919, p. 198) can help (future) teachers in their processes of professionalization.

“Only those who transcend the narrowness, randomness and provincality of their own horizon of experience and view the world from a greater distance can adequately assess a matter or a situation. Those who remain caught up in their own subjectively limited view of reality run the risk of remaining biased” (Duncker, 2005, p. 11, translated by author).

The previous explanations show that intercultural learning is more than just the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Above all, it is also about reflexivity. Intercultural learning, as described here, is characterized by processes of estrangement, assimilation and emergence and leads to a “resubjectification of culture” (Plöger, 2009, p. 82, translated by author), which involves not only the appropriation of culture, but also transformation. This names central factors that form the core of the understanding of “Bildung” (Duncker, 2004; Plöger, 2009; Vogt et al., 2024, in this anthology).

5 The Role of Physical and Virtual International Exchange in Teacher Education

The previous explanations lead to the thesis that intercultural learning, which goes beyond the “knowledge level” and above all also refers to the understanding of different social practices and a change of behavior, cannot simply be “taught” theoretically. Successful intercultural communication or intercultural social practices requires not only knowledge about the cultural imprint of peoples (own) thinking and acting, but also a variety of competencies, such as reflective skills, empathy and the ability for intercultural understanding and negotiation. In this consequence, it can be assumed that intercultural learning also requires intercultural exchange (see e.g. also Vromans et al., 2023): It is important to create social situations that are as authentic as possible, in which (culture based) disappointments, resistances and irritations are provoked on the

part of the prospective teachers, which give the opportunity to mutual intercultural reflection, negotiation and understanding, and thus make intercultural learning possible – and this is where the international exchange occurs.

There are various forms of intercultural exchange. In this article, two forms will be considered as examples, which are of particular importance in the current internationalization discussion: the physical and the virtual international exchange. In the following, a “physical international exchange” is understood as a stay abroad of a student, whereas the virtual international exchange does not require physical mobility, but only takes place based on communication of international students’ groups via digital media.

Particularly in the context of virtual international teaching, the question arises as to whether it is possible to create the social situations that are necessary for intercultural learning processes that go beyond the mere transfer of knowledge. This aspect has not yet been explored in depth in previous research. Nevertheless, there is initial evidence to suggest that it is more difficult to promote intercultural exchange and intercultural learning in such virtual international settings (see e.g. O’Dowd et al., 2020, p. 147).

Even if the virtual space makes intercultural exchange and the creation of authentic experience situations more difficult, it is not impossible to promote this. However, this requires an appropriate didactic design of a virtual international course.

6 Didactical Implications for the Design of (Virtual) International Teaching

Whether physical or virtual exchange, one cannot assume that intercultural learning simply happens. As shown before, experiences and their reflection are important elements of intercultural learning. In this chapter some conclusions are drawn from what has been written so far that show what needs to be considered when designing (virtual) international courses and exchanges, so that they support intercultural learning.

6.1 Creating a climate of trust and promoting (formal and informal) exchange

The central prerequisite for intercultural learning is the willingness of students to be open to other cultures and to approach people from other cultures with openness, sensitivity and empathy. For this reason, creating a climate of trust is essential. Especially in virtual international spaces, students need to get the chance to get to know each other better. Intercultural communication is not easy and misunderstandings and conflicts can quickly arise (Brück-Hübner, 2023, pp. 23–30; Hall, 1997). Students should be made sensitive to this from the beginning. Communication rules and the invitation to reflect together on feelings and interpretations in conflict situations can help students to communicate successfully with each other (“Meta-Communication”).

While students can immerse themselves in foreign cultures during a stay abroad, the virtual space is limited to communication. However, there are often very few opportunities for students to engage in informal exchange. For this reason, when designing virtual international teaching, care should be taken to integrate as many opportunities for communication and (formal and informal) exchange as possible. The theoretical explanations have stressed that intercultural learning benefits precisely from such exchanges and experiences gained during activities, but of course there must be a variety of opportunities for this.

6.2 Encourage irritations, inconsistencies and perspective changes

Intercultural learning is primarily triggered by situations of estrangement, irritation and dissonance. Simply meeting international students does not automatically lead to such situations arising (see section 4). However, it can be facilitated by various factors. First and foremost, by students meeting in different ways and engaging in an intensive exchange with each other. The conception of challenging group tasks that can only be solved collaboratively and consequently promote close cooperation can also evoke intercultural conflict situations. In addition to “working together”, the content dealt with in the course can also influence the resulting experiences. Polarizing topics (e.g. death penalty) or culturally different practices (e.g. inclusion) are particularly suitable for demonstrating multi-perspectivity and demanding empathy and horizon-crossing. In order to enable all students to participate equally in this kind of experience, it is important that everyone feels invited and addressed to contribute and that everyone is also prepared to contribute their controversial views. This in turn points to the need for a climate of trust within the group, as described above.

However, if there are no major divergences within the group itself, these can also be stimulated by selecting suitable teaching and learning materials and authentic tasks. For example, participants can work together on case vignettes that deal with intercultural conflicts and discuss possible solution strategies. Here, too, it is important that every student is given the opportunity to play an active role and incorporate his or her own cultural perspective.

6.3 Encourage and require reflection

As mentioned in Chapter 3, it is important that the experiences of others are not simply “suffered” or “tolerated”. There needs to be space for both individual and collective reflection. This can be stimulated and guided by reflection tasks, for example. It is important that the reflections are of the highest possible quality and are not limited to a descriptive description of the experience and the perceived (cultural) similarities and differences, but also include consequences for action and transfer ideas (Keller, 2015). The experiences and related reflections are characterized by a high degree of subjectivity. There is a risk that stigmatizing and generalizing conclusions about individual cultures will be drawn from individual reports. The conclusions drawn from these experiences – e.g. in relation to one’s own professional self-conception and the consequences of one’s own actions – should therefore always be collectively reflected upon, but also

contextualized by theory and research. Theory and research can help to take a more differentiated view of situations and can validate or relativize one's own subjective perception. In return practical experience can serve to correct, expand and develop pedagogical theories and concepts. In consequence, intercultural exchange can provide new impulses for theoretical considerations that differentiate or change one's own image of school and teaching.

7 Conclusion

This article showed that virtual international learning courses do not automatically promote processes of (inter)cultural learning and (inter)cultural reflexivity. The following key factors for promoting intercultural learning were identified: (1) the creation of a climate of trust, (2) the promotion of (formal and informal) exchange, (3) the evocation of irritating, estranging and controversial experiential situations, (4) their individual and collaborative reflection and (5) their linking back to theory and research. These considerations are initially based on theory and still require empirical validation.

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