Towards an Experience-driven Approach to Teaching
Intercultural Communication

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In this paper we define our evolving vision on teaching intercultural communication from the viewpoint of our personal experiences with a mixed student population in the International Educating Classes of Group T in Leuven, Belgium.[14] Adopting a non-essentialist perspective on culture and intercultural encounters, we describe and visualize in some detail how we have structured various types of learning activities around student experiences of intercultural encounters. We then explain that this experience-driven approach will be more effective if it is also discourse based, theory referenced, and interaction oriented. Our observations so far give reason to believe that the approach that we propose can help students gain a deeper insight into intercultural interaction both in and outside the classroom.

1. Cultures don't meet, people do

The approach towards the intercultural that we adopt in our teaching stems from what is commonly referred to as a non-essentialist view of culture (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman, 2010; Holliday, 2011). This view rejects essentialist notions of cultures as pre-existing, bounded, homogeneous entities that define people's behavior, which has become an increasingly untenable position (Philipps, 2007). An essentialist approach to culture has been shown to go hand in hand with stereotyping, us-versus-them thinking, culturism (i.e. the reduction of the other to predefined traits of the culture they are assumed to belong to), and the deployment of culture as an explanation of, or an excuse for one's own and the other's behavior (Hoffman, 2013). As a result, an essentialist approach has been shown to yield 'narratives of inability' (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman, 2010:53), preventing people from working out of their strength. Nevertheless, the essentialist view has remained the dominant paradigm in popular writing (business, tourist and survival guides) as well as in some widely cited academic texts (Hofstede, Lewis, Pinto, Trompenaars, …). In a similar vein, an essentialist approach to teaching the intercultural would suggest that successful intercultural communication depends on knowledge of the target culture, the target language, and the knowledge of translating between the target and native cultures and languages (Shi-Xu, 2001).

We position ourselves with a non-essentialist approach to culture, by contrast, that does not reduce people to their cultural backgrounds. This approach is mindful of the whole person and the particularities of each situation with an eye for what connects

and what separates people in a given encounter. As a result, it is easier to recognize diversity both within and across groups when one adopts a non-essentialist approach. Rather than viewing cultures as distinct entities that define, let alone determine people's behavior, culturality is considered as a process in which meaning is jointly constructed (Dervin, 2009b).

Accordingly, in a non-essentialist approach, the intercultural is not considered to be an external mechanism that is set in motion by the biodata of the interlocutors. Differences in nationality, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, occupation are by themselves neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for interculturality. Consequently, interpersonal or intergroup encounters cannot *a priori* be qualified to be intercultural (or not) by referring to the presence (or absence) of differences in nationality and other group memberships. Cultures don't meet, people do, as the saying goes. As a result, the intercultural can only arise in the encounter itself. Barrett, Byram, Lázár, Mompoint-Gaillard & Philippou (2013:7) recognize this in their definition of the intercultural encounter when they point to the participants themselves for revealing and making salient its intercultural dimension. In our experience this has indeed proven to be a valid starting point and, for practical purposes, we consider an encounter to be 'intercultural' whenever one of the parties involved qualifies it as such, either at the moment of occurrence or in retrospect.

How this translates in our approach to teaching intercultural communication is explained below through the quadruple qualification of 'experience driven', 'discourse focused', 'theory referenced', and 'interaction oriented'. Student experiences of intercultural encounters provide the principal input for our teaching activities. That is why we qualify our approach first and foremost as *experience driven*. These experiences come to us as language, and new discourses are in turn created by sharing, examining, and reflecting on one's own and each other's experiences. At a more basic level, all experiences can be said to be constructions of our discourses and consequently, we need to look at the *text*, a term that is here meant to include and transcend the linguistic sense, and the *context* of the discourse in order to discover the intercultural dimension of an experience (Shi-Xu, 2001). What is more, by analyzing student discourses, we can reveal the students' underlying and often implicit theories on what constitutes the intercultural and how to interact in intercultural encounters. We believe that we would not fully shoulder our responsibility as teachers if that would be the end of it, though. Action speaks louder than words. Therefore, our approach to teaching intercultural communication would not be complete if it was not oriented at interaction and we did not stimulate our students to experiment actively both in and outside the classroom.

2. Experience driven

In accordance with Byram's (2008) axiom of being intercultural, we have made our students' intercultural experiences the very focus of attention, analysis and reflection in our teaching. Drawing on a variety of techniques (including journal writing, storytelling, focus groups, talking circles, debates, ...), we elicit student experiences as the principal material to feed our teaching activities and propel the learning process.

Since we have mostly been teaching mixed groups of home and international students, these elicited experiences often relate to the interaction among students within the class group itself. This focus on the student mobility experience – including the experiences of international students in their temporary 'cloakroom communities' (Bauman, 2004), their experiences with home students and their experiences with others in the academic and the wider host environment - has recently been gaining ground in intercultural studies (see e.g. Byram & Dervin, 2008; Dervin, 2009a; 2009b; Dervin & Layne, 2013).

From our teaching practice to date has emerged what we have termed "the crystal canvas of experience-based learning activities" (Figure 1; Van Maele & Mertens, 2012). Because they are so precious to our practice, we visualized the experiences as a crystal. Just like the manifold facets of a crystal reflect the external light as well as its intrinsic structure, we have witnessed how working with experiences from a variety of perspectives can reveal valuable information about the external observers - that is, our students - as well as about the multi-faceted nature of the experience itself. Surrounding the crystal at the center, each circle on the canvas represents one type of teaching activity. In clockwise fashion, these activities are the following: narrating the experience through a variety of media and channels; describing the experience (i.e., to jot down the parties' words and actions); reconstructing the interpretation that each party assigned to the other's language and behavior at the time of the event; and diagnosing the experience from a certain distance: "Looking back, can you put your finger on what happened?" Further, experiences provide the input for broader *intervision* activities in which students offer advice in the spirit of collegial counseling: 'If this situation should present itself again, what could you do differently?' In the final activity type on the canvas, students engage in role-playing or simulating alternative scripts and scenarios for the central experience.

We also learned that student performance in the listed activities tends to improve when students are also trained in skills that support the various types of activity. The arrows in the figure refer to such supporting skills, aiming to enhance, again in clockwise fashion, the facility of recalling and expressing memories; the quality of observation that accurate description relies on; the agility at reframing, which allows for flexibility in interpretation; the suspension of judgment that is required for independent diagnosis; the faculty of invention that unleashes creative solutions and advice, and the spirit of experimentation that enriches simulation.

Sometimes we help students hone selected skills through dedicated activities; at other times we integrate these supporting skills in our teaching in a more cursory manner. Sometimes we set up activities as a series in a learning cycle; at other times we focus on just one or two activities, possibly in iteration. In doing this, we have been inspired by a number of other models, which all seem to echo Bennett & Bennett's D-I-E adage (Describe-Interpret-Evaluate, see http://www.intercultural.org/die.php), such as PEER (Prepare-Engage-Evaluate-Reflect: Holmes & O'Neill, 2012), ODIS (Observe-Describe-Interpret-Suspend judgment: Ting-Toomey, 1999), and 3RA (Spencer-Oatey & Davidson, 2013).

Finally, underlying all the types of activities and supporting skills that we bring to the experiences is the canvas itself, the fabric of which is awareness. While the crystal reveals different acts through which our intercultural experiences can be illuminated, the fabric of the canvas stands for open awareness. This open awareness is not to be confused with the action of directing attention, which excludes as it focuses on one object or another. Awareness here refers to a more intuitive 'ability to notice where we are' (Mipham, 2003) which is by definition 'choiceless' (Krishnamurti, 1980).
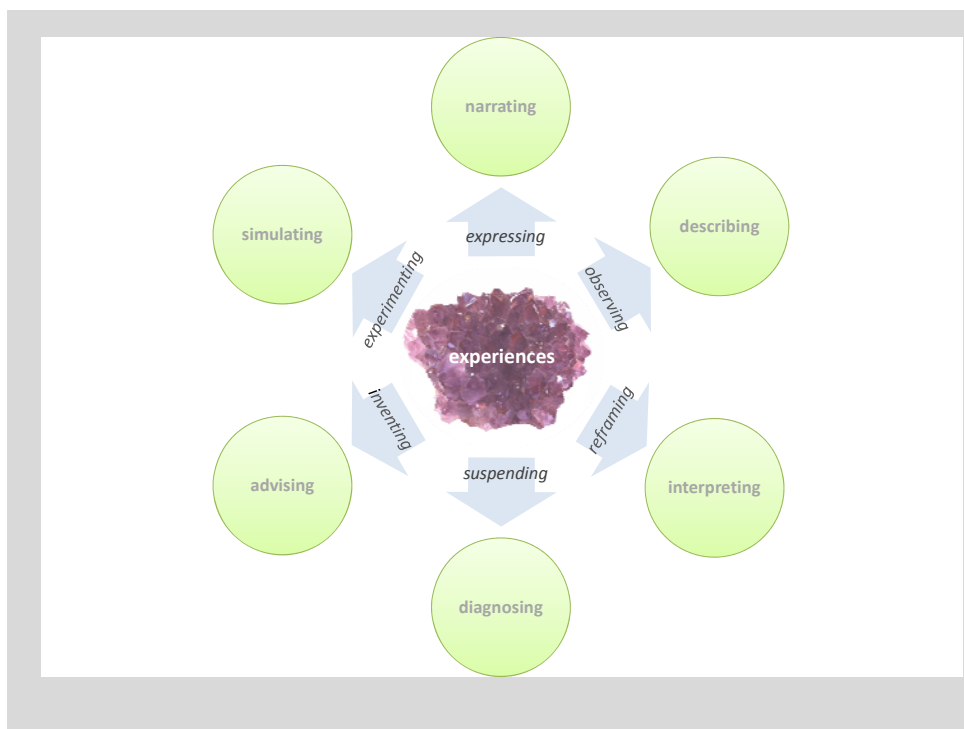

Figure 1. The crystal canvas of experience-based learning activities

3. Discourse focused

The (con)textuality of experiences, as explained above, requires that we focus on discourses in order to access the intercultural dimension of the encounters. Discourse is here defined as 'text-in-context', and the plural form 'discourses' can refer either to a collection of instances of discourse or to a multitude of types of discourse (Shi-Xu, 2001). The focus on discourses also offers a window for investigating the use of lingua francas in international student groups (Dervin, forthcoming), an example *par excellence* of how speakers present and construct themselves as intercultural individuals.

In our teaching practice we start by considering student-produced (inter)personal discourses (Van Maele, Mertens & Scatolini, 2011; Van Maele & Mertens, 2012). From there, we tend to widen our scope to intergroup, organizational or societal

discourses, including the dominant discourses of everyday talk and the media (e.g. Peeters, 2012, a documentary about sexism in the streets of Brussels).

This constitutes the first sense in which our approach is discourse focused: we analyze existing, student-provided text-in-context through close reading (listening, viewing), inspired by models for the analysis of intercultural discourse (Hoffman, 2009) and adhering to pragmatic guidelines for empirical research (Verschueren, 2012). Yet, there is also another sense in which our approach to teaching intercultural communication can be called discourse focused. As teachers, we attach great importance to initiating and fostering discourses of diversity and equality with our students, as advocated by Shi-Xu (2001) or Holliday, Hyde & Kullman (2010). To promote this in our teaching, we create space and time for genuine dialogue, which is characterized by the practices of 'respecting', 'suspending', 'listening' and 'voicing' (Isaacs, 1999).

4. Theory referenced

If our teaching is driven by experiences that can be studied as discourse, then what is the function of theory in our approach to teaching intercultural communication? Just like we have fully referenced the text that you have in front of you, we reference what emerges in the classroom by pointing toward relevant concepts, models, frameworks, and theories. That is why we call our approach theory-referenced, rather than theory-based. One framework that we have recurrently referred to is Hoffman's (2009) TOPOI framework for intercultural communication. This acronym stands for five perspectives from which you can view a situation and act on it: Tongue (i.e. language), Order, Persons, Organization, and Intentions. Other sources that we regularly refer to include the theoretical models of intercultural competence of Deardorff (2006), Byram (2008), and Ting-Toomey (1999) as well as several competency frameworks that find their origin in research in professional contexts, notably Global People (Spencer-Oatey & Stadler, 2009) and INCA (Prechtl & Davidson Lund, 2007).

Finally, it is important to point out that referencing is not limited to existing publications. To the contrary, some of our activities are intended to generate original codes, concepts, categories, and theories of intercultural communication. A dialogue starting from a journal entry or from student comments on a (controversial) statement (e.g. *Knowledge about the other culture is essential for successful intercultural dialogue*) provide such chances for theorizing together with the students. The richest pool, however, remains the student accounts of their experiences, which, as mentioned above, reveal their often implicit theories of identity, belonging, what is effective and appropriate in interaction, and other key ingredients of intercultural encounters.

5. Interaction oriented

By qualifying our approach as interaction oriented, we position interaction firmly as part and parcel of the learning process. Like Kolb (2007), we recognize that a learning cycle is not complete without 'active experimentation'. The teaching activity of simulation and its supporting skill of experimentation in Figure 1 attest to this. The

arena in which students act out scenarios for behaving in encounters requires an interaction that complements the more detached position from which they analyze these encounters. The orientation towards interaction may be most outspoken in the simulations but it can also be found in other types of teaching activities from the crystal canvas: interaction on the stage for narrating, at a forum for describing, in the circle for advising, ... Because interaction in itself is no guarantee for intercultural learning, in a second wave students are asked to interact through dialogue and reflection on the learning experiences they just engaged in.

To interact in this way demands competences that transcend the competence to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from other cultural groups. It requires an "intercultural interaction competence" that includes the ability "to handle the psychological demands and dynamic outcomes that result from such interchanges" (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009:51). Hoffman's (2009) TOPOI framework, which applies to both analysis and interaction, is again a valuable guide.

Finally, we would like to point out that the interaction that we envisage cannot be restricted to classroom activities. The individuals in our classroom are more than students; they each belong to and engage with multiple other groups. The entire world is our classroom. In order to promote transfer, we offer students a variety of contexts outside the classroom for interventions - performances, creations, events - that lead to a broader range of experiences and, hence, we hope, an enhanced awareness.

Conclusion

Taking a non-essentialist perspective on culture and intercultural encounters, we have introduced an approach to teaching intercultural communication that is driven by experiences, based on discourses, referenced with theories, and oriented towards interaction. This approach has developed from our teaching practice and from listening to our students, whose experiences have been a constant source of inspiration. We expect that our views on teaching intercultural communication will keep evolving as we meet new students with new stories, yielding new insights and, if we can act on it, new learning activities. Already today we appreciate how structuring our views as described in this paper has stimulated and facilitated the search for and selection of learning activities. The crystal canvas has created a space for us to think up, explore, and try out a diversity of activities, some of which might otherwise not readily be recognized as promoting intercultural learning. The figure has been helpful in setting direction but never in an exclusive way. It should not be taken as an exhaustive model for curriculum development. To the contrary, we offer the crystal canvas as a starting point for dialogue to all teachers and researchers of intercultural communication. We also share and discuss it with our students as a way of creating alignment in defining the goals that we want to pursue and the paths that can take us there. That is why we consider our students as our original intended audience for this paper.

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