

Developing a Portfolio of Intercultural Competences in teacher education: The case of a Finnish international programme
Fred Dervin & Kaisa Kuoppala

To be published in the *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*

Abstract: The concept of intercultural competences is contested although it is omnipresent in varied fields of research and practice. Its assessment is also questioned: How can it be done? By whom? When? Should assessment be summative or formative – or both? In order to be able to assess anything, learning and teaching objectives must be clear, coherent, and consistent. Yet intercultural competences are often polysemic and rely heavily on problematic concepts such as (national) culture and identity. Here we revisit the concept and reflect on its use for formative assessment within international teacher education. Having developed a Portfolio of Intercultural Competences (PIC) to be used by student teachers in an English-medium teacher education programme in Finland, we explain how the portfolio came to life (theory, methods) and how it can help develop students' intercultural competences. We report on three components of the portfolio: the students' reflexive and critical essays on five stories of meaningful and/or memorable intercultural encounters written during a course on multicultural education and focus group discussions amongst the students. We analyse the data with discursive pragmatics, a linguistic method which looks deeper into participants' discourses.

Keywords: intercultural competence, portfolio of intercultural competences (PIC), teacher education, formative assessment

Using a Portfolio of Intercultural Competences in an international teacher education programme

Introduction

The concept of intercultural competences is now a component of many and varied research domains: language education, business studies, health education, multicultural education, etc. The concept also goes hand in hand with the ‘language’ of diversity which, according to Puwar (2004: 1), “is today embraced as a holy mantra across different sites.” But this “holy mantra” is increasingly deemed to be problematic. For Aikman (2012) the polysemy of such concepts is an issue that needs to be urgently addressed by researchers and practitioners alike. Another concern lies in the fact that the central concept of culture (*inter-cultural*) is “ideological in nature” (Holliday, 2010: 1) and cannot thus be treated lightly as it easily leads to “the demonization of a particular foreign Other” (*ibid.*) and the avoidance of the idea of hybridity. This is why culture cannot be used in conjunction with the idea of e.g. purity or mere difference as, according to Laplantine & Nouss (1977: 21), this is contrary to our *métisse* history. Finally, as Gillespie, Howarth and Cornish (2012: 392) argue, the concept of culture represents, alongside with race, nationality and ethnicity, a problematic way of categorizing people into cultural groups (see Abdallah-Preteille, 1986; Dervin, 2012).

Taking into account these important criticisms and the increasing agreement amongst researchers and practitioners that research on the intercultural must change (Dervin et al., 2012; Dervin & Keihäs, 2013; Machart et al., 2013; Poutiainen, 2013), this article presents results from a study on intercultural competences in the field of international teacher education in Finland. During their study year, student teachers have taken a course on education for diversities and done several tasks as part of a Portfolio of Intercultural Competences. In this article, we are interested in how the students perceive the work on this portfolio and especially the potential impact it has on how they discuss multicultural/intercultural issues related to (teacher) education.

1. What ‘model’ of intercultural competences?

1.1. A critique of the intercultural

In order to be able to propose a portfolio of intercultural competences in teacher education, one needs to reflect on the meaning attached to the ‘intercultural.’

Our first argument was to reject an approach that merely consists in “tighten[ing] up a linguistic screw here and loosen[ing] a cultural bolt there” (Shi-xu, 2001: 287). For the latter we thus move beyond culturalism (and other forms of -isms such as nationalism, ethnicism, Pieterse, 2004: 82). Culturalism consists in merely putting “premium on knowledge of the working/target language, knowledge of the target culture, and the knowledge of translating between the target and native languages and cultures” (Shi-xu, 2001: 281). This has been demonstrated as being problematic as it often leads to simplistic explanations in cases of misunderstandings and non-understandings, such as the people under scrutiny lack ‘knowledge.’ In other words, it gives the impression that “culture wraps (these people) in its suffocating embrace”

(Prashad, 2001: xi) and leaves them no chance to take responsibilities (or co-responsibilities) for their action (Wikan, 2002). In a similar vein, in his criticism of culturalism, J.-F. Bayart (2003: 85) claims that “culturalist reasoning posits the existence of a permanent inner core peculiar to each culture that confers on the latter its veridical nature and determines the present.” If our understanding of culture in the intercultural does not take into account the fact that culture is a social construct “vaguely referring to a vastly complex set of phenomena” (Jahoda, 2012: 300), the individuals we work on and with, are left “suffocating.”

An increasing number of researchers working on intercultural competences also complain about the fact that such a limited, modern (versus postmodern) and positivistic vision sets aside an important aspect of social interaction: power. According to Shi-xu (2001: 287) there is a tendency in research and practice to ignore the fact that “[i]ntercultural communication is situated in the context of imbalance in power and inequality.” The scholar gives the following examples: imbalance between the East and the West, the North and the South, men and women. In other words, the ‘intercultural’ never takes place in a “power vacuum” (Shi-xu, *ibid.*). This is why it is essential to reflect and work on interactional and contextual elements in intercultural communication. For the sociologist F. de Singly (2003: 12), power can be marked; for example in certain situations some people are entitled to decide what identity markers and ‘cultures’ belong to whom or simply what social categories can be used to talk about self and other, while other people do not have the symbolic power to do so. He adds that some individuals are entitled to play with and/or opt out of certain inherited identities, while some others cannot (*ibid.*: 45). Imposing an identity in relation to a culture or a nation represents for de Singly an abuse of power (see a form of “totalitarianism,” *ibid.*: 91). In education, this means that teachers and school staff should avoid labeling and ‘boxing’ children (migrants and others).

1.2. Renewing intercultural competences

In the previous section we have examined critically how to position our understanding of the intercultural in order to conceptualize intercultural competences within the framework of an international teacher education program. We are explaining below what we have decided to take into account when devising a portfolio of intercultural competences. These elements were also introduced to the students in an introductory course on education for diversities.

Most models of intercultural competences still rely on the problematic aspects that we listed in the previous section. For instance Deardorff (2006), who attempted to provide a synthesis of the current scholarship on the concept, shows that most scholars agree on the following definition: “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (*ibid.*: 247). When considering the list of components in this definition, one can easily see that they contain many of the problems aforementioned. They include *attitudes*, i.e. “respect for other cultures.” But what is meant with culture here? Can one respect everything, bearing in mind that culture plays an ontological role in the creation of identity and that thus individuals can invent ‘cultural’ elements to serve certain purposes (Abdallah-Preteille, 1986; Dervin & Keihäs, 2013)? Another component is *skills*, meaning “skills of interacting with people from other cultures.” What if one has a less powerful position than the other, can one interact

with them fully? *Behaviours* refers to “behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately during intercultural encounters.” Encounters are co-constructed with interlocutors and so are behaviours; this is why one individual cannot take full responsibility of what is taking place in interaction.

Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) have proposed a review of the various models of intercultural competences. They categorize the models into five: 1. Compositional models propose a simple list of what often appear to be unrelated attitudes, skills, knowledge, and behaviours; 2. Co-orientational models concentrate on interactions and on the construction of self and other; 3. Developmental models describe how individuals acquire intercultural competences; 4. Adaptational models examine adjustment and adaptation of people involved in intercultural encounters; and 5. Causal path models are interested in how different components of intercultural competences are related. Our understanding of intercultural competences is based on a co-orientational model as a point that we find essential is to bear in mind the fact that the intercultural is always “immersed in interactive relations with others before we know it” (Gallagher, 2011: 488). Therefore the concepts of language and discourse play an important role in our understanding of intercultural competences. As we are involved in interactions, power is always an aspect that needs to be taken into account. For Lakoff (1990: 1), in any type of conversations, from the “most intimate tête-à-tête to a speech aimed at millions” (ibid.), we all have at our disposal interactive strategies (e.g. of persuasion and manipulation) that we are entitled or not to use, depending on the power imbalance and inequalities that constitute what we do (ibid.). For the intercultural, this means that we need to question certain practices and uses, such as the ones detailed above.

Our approach to intercultural competence is very close to Breidenbach & Nyíri’s (2009: 343-345) definition of such undertakings as the “Critical ability to question the implicit and explicit assumptions behind cultural claims and the power dynamics that they may be concealing.” Even though the two researchers do not use the phrase intercultural competences, we feel that this fits very well the bill. The following questions, proposed by Breidenbach & Nyíri (ibid.), can help student teachers to be reflexive and critical in intercultural situations:

- What explicit and implicit statements about identity markers are involved, about which groups?
- What are the fault lines along which groups are defined and differentiated?
- Are you overlooking important differences within (or across) these groups?
- How free are members of the group to change or decline norms?
- Do they open up or shut down options of dissent (or exit) within the group?
- Who is making the statements? Why might they be making them?
- On whose behalf are they speaking - explicitly or implicitly? What lends them authority to do so?
- Why are they able to voice their opinions? Whose voices are not heard?
- Are the statements that are being made empowering or oppressing the groups or individuals involved (which ones)?

These are some of the questions that the students in this study were asked to consider during the course on education for diversities and in their work on the portfolio of

intercultural competences. These questions force the respondent to critically examine their own and other's behaviour and discourse in different situations.

It is easy to see based on the previous arguments that when we talk about assessment of intercultural competences in this article, we refer to formative assessment or, in agreement with Zarate and Radenkovic (2003), the recognition of intercultural competences. As the intercultural is based on and leads to situations of co-construction, identification (identity as a process), and power imbalance, it is impossible to attempt forms of summative assessment, which would give the impression that we are able to 'evacuate' these elements from situations that we observe or from what people report on their intercultural encounters (Dervin, 2013). The objective of the portfolio is that through reflecting and critiquing one's discourses, attitudes, behaviours, and those of the Other, student teachers can become more ready to accept uncertainty and develop certain strategies to deal with it. We believe that this is essential in today's teacher education, be it international or not. Student teachers need to develop appropriate ways and tools for recognition, analysis and action, which can help them to work on and with everyone's diversity in the classroom and beyond (Dervin & Keihäs, 2013).

2. Context: the STEP program

We designed a Portfolio of Intercultural Competences (PICSTEP) for students in a new Subject Teacher (STEP) at the University of Helsinki in Finland. The Department of Teacher Education launched the one-year English-medium programme in 2011 with the goal of also attracting international students and non-Finnish speakers to teacher education. STEP gives students official teaching qualifications to work as a subject teacher in basic and upper secondary education. STEP has a body of both Finnish and international students with experience from various educational contexts, with an annual intake of maximum 25 students. The design of PICSTEP coincided with a reform of some common courses for all teacher students in the Department of Teacher Education. A previous one-credit course on multicultural education was replaced by a course with a larger scope, of which two credits were allocated to multicultural lectures. Because STEP is a new programme in the department, continuous research is done for its development at different levels with the goal of attaining an international and intercultural programme that consists of courses that are coherent and content-specific to fit the multicultural group of students and their needs. This created an opportunity for us to design the portfolio for a fairly small group of students.

The Portfolio of Intercultural Competences consists in total of seven different yet interrelated components that the students complete at various stages throughout their year in STEP. We present the first three components in this paper. The first component is completed before one of the authors' lectures on multicultural education that presents the critical stance discussed above. Before the course started, the students were asked to write five stories about meaningful and/or memorable intercultural encounters that they had experienced (Component 1). These short stories served as diagnostic assessment of students' understanding of and behaviour in intercultural situations. In this article we concentrate and analyse students' reflexive and critical essays that were written about the pre-course assignment (Component 2) and their focus group discussions, which were done while the students were writing

the reflexive and critical essays (Component 3). As such these three components (as well as the four remaining ones) all work hand in hand and allow both instructors and students to concentrate on a coherent and progressive approach to intercultural competences.

The 2-credit multicultural education course is a starting point in the pedagogical year to awake students' curiosity and interest in the importance of intercultural issues and make them consider their own prejudices, stereotypes and behavior in multicultural situations. The later components in the portfolio are tied to two reflection courses (taught by one of the authors) in the autumn and spring semesters and thus extend students' involvement in these issues throughout the year and make it possible for the instructors to follow up on the development of the students' intercultural competences. Obviously as the course is quite short – even though the work on the portfolio lasted over a whole academic year – what follows should be considered as a preliminary exploration of the perception and impact of the work on intercultural competences in our context.

3. Data collection and methods

In this article we have chosen to analyse one of the focus group discussions (out of six groups that had a total of 21 students) that was conducted by three students and the essays written by these same students. This article can thus be considered a case study that will allow us to systematize the analysis of intercultural competences in our future articles. The selection of the focus group for analysis in this study was arbitrary, as a start to a full analysis of all the focus groups and essays. The arbitrariness was considered important so that we would not only select for example those essays that showed the greatest changes in the students' thoughts and ideas towards intercultural learning and behaviour. Each focus group was 30 minutes in length. One of the authors facilitated in dividing the students into groups of three or four students beforehand with the goal of mixing students from different backgrounds and different disciplines. The same author also helped set up the recorders for the focus group session in a large classroom. The students were left alone without any teachers present so that there would be the least amount of interference (see Markova et al., 2007 about focus groups from a dialogical perspective). The instructions given to the students were short:

For approx. 30 minutes we want you to discuss with your partners some issues that you feel were interesting, important but also provocative or controversial during the lectures. As you are completing an essay on the topic based on your 5 stories at the moment, and as the discussions will take place before the deadline, this will be a great occasion to discuss some of the points that you are making in your essay, things you've read in the articles, etc.

The due date for the essays was a few days after the recording of the focus groups, so most of the students were still working on them and the group discussion was an opportunity for the students to reflect on their ideas in them. The students were asked to write a maximum of 2000 words for a reflexive essay based on their previously written five stories of memorable intercultural encounters. They were requested to critically reflect on their experiences, behaviour, ideas, and opinions with the help of critical intercultural literature and the lectures on multicultural education that had aimed at arousing their curiosity and critical thinking on the intercultural.

We use discursive pragmatics for analyzing the focus group discussions and essays. According to Zienkowski, Östman and Verschueren (2011) discursive pragmatics allows researchers to analyse data by looking for hidden and unexpressed voices, referential strategies (what kind of “authorities” are mentioned, how people are named and referred to, and what group memberships are claimed), and argumentation strategies (what kind of arguments are given, how are perspectives presented). All these elements can be identified by means of many and varied linguistic elements such as deictics (markers of person, time and space such as personal pronouns, adverbs and verbs), utterance modalities (adverbs, shifters, etc.) but also nouns as they may indicate the attitude of a speaker towards another person, an entity, a phenomenon, etc. (Dervin, 2013). As the intercultural is highly ideological and contested, we feel that this approach is well fitted for the purpose.

4. Student teachers co-constructing the intercultural

4.1. Analysis of the Focus Group

The focus group under scrutiny is structured as follows: first the students discuss the focus of the essays that they are writing as part of their PICSTEP; second the concept of culture is contested; third some of the students share their own experiences in Japan, China and Finland; and fourth two of the students who used to live in the USA interrogate the idea of origins in this context. The excerpts that we have selected to examine in this paper are such where the students discuss changes in their own thinking regarding intercultural issues after they had attended the multicultural lectures, or where they discuss their own or others’ actions in multicultural situations.

4.1.1. Walking on eggs: What can(not) be said?

As the students discussed the topics they had chosen to cover in the essays, they stumbled across words and terms that they were not sure they could use any more, or if the terms were appropriate in the light of the new information they now had. This was in reference to the critical perspectives they had learned in the multicultural lectures or read in the articles for their essays (see section 1). Their hesitance becomes apparent in the following excerpt, both verbally but also through a laugh that they sometimes shared. In their conversation they attempt to construct and negotiate meaning for some phenomena or acts of behaviour:

(1)

Henry¹: what were your stories about?

Eija: hm [...] i guess there was this thing about language and power hmm it’s kind of hard . i’m struggling somehow to relate all these articles with all the experiences . [...]. last summer i was in [japan] for three months so i wrote about like um . different . what’s polite and what’s not polite what different uh what are they . politeness like what’s what are they- manners (laughter) is that the right word

Henry: manners

¹ To protect the privacy of our students’ identities, we have given pseudonyms in place of their actual names.

Eija: i think manners . but i guess that's a social construct or something
Henry: and you Sophia
Sophia: yes for instance i told about one of my stories chinese modesty because i went to china . and i spent some months there and chinese er normally if there is for instance some compliment or something like oh you did a very good job then uh the answer you get from chinese is like er er no no i didn't i didn't do a good job you know
Eija: yeah that's at least how people say how finnish people take compliments that finnish people don't know how to take compliments but that's a stereotype of course

In the excerpt Eija explains that one of the stories that she reported in her pre-course assignment was related to politeness in Japan, where she had lived for a few months. When she tries to find the right word to talk about this, she struggles with the word “manners” and asks her colleagues for help (“is that the right word”). The laughter before asking this question appears to be a common strategy in our data when the students claim something that was contested and deconstructed during the lectures. In a sense we feel that there is intertextuality and dialogism (Linell, 2009) here: the students know that the focus groups were being recorded and, thus, their instructors would listen to them. The laughter can mark certain awkwardness of having to discuss these issues in the ‘presence’ of the instructors while the students perceive the concepts problematic and are perhaps uncertain whether they are using them correctly.

When Eija provides an explanation for her choice of the word *manner*, she seems to be referring to something that was put forward in the course: “i guess that's a social construct or something. ” The phrase “or something” is a subjective marker (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2002), which could show that she is not fully convinced of the term “social construct.” Yet in her next turn, when she compares discourses of politeness in Japan and compliment-taking in Finland, she qualifies the latter as “a stereotype of course.” In spite of her previous hesitation with the right term, her final comment shows a clear understanding of the construction of national characteristics as “imagined” (Anderson, 1992). There could be an indication here that this student teacher is able to analyse representations of interculturality (the Japanese, the Finns) from a socio-constructivist and critical perspective (see Holliday, 2010; Dervin, 2012). We believe that this example of a discussion of how to talk about interculturality is a first and important step in moving beyond a culturalistic approach to questions of interculturality.

In the focus group another student, Sophia, relates her experience of a stay in China where a teacher had explained to them about “the Chinese way of modesty.” This type of teaching can be considered as part of culturalism where simplified and unified ways of behaviour are portrayed as belonging to all people of a certain country or culture (cf. Shi-xu 2001). Although Sophia seems to be saying that she had tried to adapt to this expectation of behaviour, she only now realized that she had forced herself to act as someone else by accepting and resorting to this culturalist and uncritical argument:

(2)

Sophia: [...] and then the teacher the history teacher explained us a little bit this kind of chinese way of modesty and the language teacher as well . so then when each time when some chinese tell me oh you did very well this or or you are so good on this or you cook well or whatever i i am like no no (laughter) no no no i really didn't . i am not good on this i am not and then er i got a reaction er like twice like person say oh you are so modest you are so nice person because you are so modest [...] . when i think about it now . after the course er i mean is it like i am losing a bit of my my own ident identity like my way of answering why can i not just be me and say like er um thank you very much yes i did it well but it took me so much time and something even if the other will like think that i am not modest but it doesn't matter . it is how normally i do that you know and er . but why i really like put myself in the . i am afraid now to use the word culture (laughter)

Eija: yeah (laughter) [...]

Sophia: why shouldn't i now do that it's like acting a little bit . like acting to be like the other . [...] . you know really it's making me think why i answer that way . so . maybe just to be nice . but er but but now i think about it because we saw we said in the course that not because some act like this that everybody . is like chinese there is billions (laughter) so how you can just come and think that they all answer this way and that they are all modest and uh .

In this excerpt Sophia seems to be confused by the gap between what her teacher had told her and what she has now realized of herself and of the assumed behaviour of all the Chinese people. She plays two scenes in the excerpt to convince her colleagues of this confusion. The authors of the discourses that are reported (or represented see Johansson, 2000) are very general (“some Chinese”, a “person”) but they seem to serve the purpose of being authentic and convincing (e.g. “oh you did very well this or or you are so good on this or you cook well or whatever” followed by her own hesitant reaction “i i am like no no (laughter) no no no i really didn't . i am not good on this i am not”). This even leads her to claim that “i am losing a bit of my my own ident identity.” In other words, while she was trying to apply the rules that were given to her by an authority (her teacher), she assumed at face-value that those truly were the way that *all* Chinese behaved because she in fact met some people who corresponded to this stereotype and complimented her on her modeled modest behaviour. This conscious realization of having acted contrary to one's natural and normal behaviour, seems now to be more clearly explainable and explicit after the course and her work on the Portfolio (“when i think about it now . after the course”). The multicultural lectures and the PICSTEP seem to have served one of their purposes of arousing students to critically consider their own beliefs, perceptions, behaviours, and even information taught to them. Sophia seems almost astounded to have realized that she had believed such simplistic ‘truths’ about the Chinese. She claims to understand those teachings now as exactly that: simplified explanations and knowledge of the target culture and its people (i.e. culturalism, Shi-xu 2001, Prashad, 2001).

Another interesting phenomenon in this excerpt is the fact that the students seem to be particularly afraid of using the word ‘culture’ in their discussion (“i am afraid now to use the word culture”). This seems to relate to their hesitance of the new concepts and

their renewed understanding that culture is a social construct instead of a set of commonly shared fixed behavioural traits attributed to people for example in a certain group or nation-state (cf. Abdallah-Preteille, 1986; Dervin & Keihäs, 2013). Note again the use of laughter that comes with the unease when using of the word culture. This most probably denotes an intertext with the ‘third party’ who will be listening to their discussion afterwards (the instructors; Markova et al., 2007).

4.1.2. Signs of reflexivity?

While the students seem to be “walking on eggs” in relation to the concepts that they use to negotiate and co-construct the discussion group, many examples of reflexivity are to be found in the transcription.

The first excerpt here is the continuation of excerpt (2) which demonstrated the confusion experienced by Sophia in China in relation to “Chinese modesty.” In this excerpt, Eija and Henry discuss a stereotype about Finns (“they don’t know how to take compliments”):

(3)

Eija: yeah but i’m i’m just . i do feel a little bit confused sometimes with these things (laughter) like okay . if you say . finnish people don’t know how to take compliments . that’s something you . that’s something i guess that you learn . from others . and i guess you can make a conscious decision not to do . i mean you don’t have to do the same way as everybody else or . behave the same way but . so that’s not culture no . that’s uh . what’s that (laughter)

Henry: but maybe it’s a bit universal i i mean i don’t i myself don’t know how to take compliments and i’m not finnish nor chinese (laughter)

Eija: yeah yeah okay so it’s .

Eija uses a generic “you” to discuss what can and cannot be done when faced with such stereotypes (“you learn from others”... “you can make a conscious decision”), thus giving an authoritative tone to her discourse. Her comments are followed by a humorous comment from Henry, which is reminiscent of the argument of universalism. This first excerpt seems to demonstrate that both students are able to discuss and reflect on ‘common sense’ ideas that surround the intercultural.

As the students continue their conversation, they realize that people – themselves included – have stereotypical beliefs of self and others. Although they think that people’s behaviour is a personal trait and not because they are from a certain ‘culture’ or ‘country’ (the two words are often used interchangeably in research and practice, see Eriksen, 2002), they agree that people tend to judge others’ acts based on stereotypes (cf. Wikan 2002). While Eija relays that one is sometimes surprised or disappointed that a person acts differently than we expect them to act based on their nationality, Henry asserts that he has repeatedly been told that he does not fit the stereotype of a person coming from his country of origin.

(4)

Henry: i i get that comment about myself all the time when people learn about the country where i came from and that’s one of the things i wrote in the stories

for . like . i realized that . i didn't fit the stereotype of the country that i was coming from
Eija+Sophia: yes

This excerpt leads the group to discuss the links between politics, power, and the intercultural. As had been explained and worked upon in the course, stereotypes are something that we need to watch out for because of the power imbalance they create (de Singly 2003; see section 1.2.). Eija seems to agree with this approach and refers to the set literature to justify her thoughts. Yet when they come to talk about 'Americans,' Eija and Henry seem to jump too easily into conclusions and resort to stereotypes. Dervin (2012) has labeled this approach to the intercultural *Janusian* in reference to the two-faced God: on the one hand the students promote a new form of interculturality that deconstructs solid and static images and discourses about self and other but on the other hand, they use these discourses to explain certain phenomena – while realizing that they are using a stereotype. Learning is not a linear process and it can also be a complicated process to learn away from familiar ways to act, such as using stereotypes. In this extract, however, the student acknowledges the use of a stereotype but nonetheless uses it as an explanation. The discussion that follows is about how the idea of origins is used in the USA:

(5)

Eija: but sometimes i feel that americans . this is a generalization and a stereotype . will um er want to emphasize their roots

Henry: they want to show

Eija: maybe if they are from the west . if they are from europe or their ancestors . maybe this is this kind of a power relation thing if they're from not so . like perceived not as powerful country they don't want to emphasize they want to say they are american . but if they are from . er . like . europe the west is perceived as a powerful area in the world . yes i am german . i am irish . i am i am then then still they are american or they have lived their their family has lived there for generations

Regardless of the stereotyping and generalizing, about which Eija warns her listeners, the co-constructed analysis of the use (and 'abuse') of origins in the USA refers back to the discussion of power. This constitutes a good example of reflexivity: the students note their shortcomings but push a more complex analysis of certain intercultural phenomena.

The focus group discussion clearly shows that the students had been deeply affected by the critical multicultural lectures and that they were still trying to come to terms with what they really believed about some intercultural issues or how they understood concepts, especially in relation to what they had written in the first component of the portfolio. The students had come to understand that all people have stereotypical beliefs of us and the others and that there are different kinds of power relations that come into play in intercultural communication. While Henry had already finished his essay about his five stories before the focus group, Sophia and Eija were still working on theirs. Excerpts from the students' essays will be presented and analysed next.

5. The essays as examples of varied positionings towards the intercultural

This section complements the previous one with an analysis of the essays that were handed in by the student teachers after the multicultural education course and the group discussions. In the essays the students had to re-read the five intercultural stories that they had written some months before and analyse them from a new perspective. It is striking to see that the three students position themselves from three differing yet complementary positions towards the intercultural.

As was already seen in Eija's turns in the previous sections, her preference seems to be for an approach that relates power, politics, and the intercultural. Her essay, which analyses her short stories from a critical and reflexive perspective, contains many excerpts which suggest an engaged approach to the intercultural and especially in the use of the concept of culture.

- She reflects on what she has learnt in this respect:

(6)

After the reading and the course I feel I have a broader understanding of the consequences and motives that lie behind the use of words such as 'culture.'

(7)

Culture and "cultural" differences are often used to explain inequality and discrimination of others.

- She is able to set 'objectives' for future political, educational, and everyday life contexts. As such she seems to concentrate on a macro and mezzo level rather than micro (Bleszynska, 2008). Her discourses in the essay are somewhat objectivizing in what follows (use of 'one' and 'we', no first person pronouns):

(8)

Especially in the field of politics, one must be aware of the real-world consequences that the use of certain definitions might have, and be critical of the motives behind using a certain definition or emphasising certain aspects of culture.

(9)

In order to solve future problems (e.g. war, poverty, diseases) we need a more unified wo[r]ld, and because the emphasis of culture creates difference, such emphasis should be discarded from educational, political and everyday discourse.

In a similar but less political vein, Henry proposes a 'liquid' reading of interculturality. His analyses of his five stories rest mostly on a micro-level, taking into account the importance of contexts and interlocutors in the construction of perceptions and experiences. Unlike most students, when he examines the stories he had written, he demonstrates that the constructivist and critical approach that was presented during the course was already available in his discourses:

(10)

As can be grasped by reading the narrative, culture in my mind is about people and their experiences, rather than about pre-established notions or ideas of what people from a given land are like.

The importance of the other in the way he has constructed his discourses is commented upon many times in the essay:

- In what follows he prefers not to mention the country of origin as he claims that his family and friends have had more influence on who he is and what he does:

(11)

I would rather leave my country of provenance unnamed, as it seems that my personal experiences had little to do with having grown up in it, relative to how much they had to do with my own family and other personal matters

- When he explains his experiences in the USA, it is through the presence of others (“interpersonal relationships”) that he justifies his “adaptation” rather than through the contact between two cultures (he actually writes about culture in his essay that “Culture is not a creature that has a life of its own”):

(12)

Much of my adaptation process had to do with interpersonal relationships, and with trying to understand and mimic how people bond.

The third and last student, Sophia appears to be ‘hyper-reflexive’ in her essay in the sense that whenever she examines an excerpt from her essays, she criticizes her discourses – even performing a critical discourse analysis of what she had written. Tellingly, the sentence “If I had to write again, I would say...” appears at least 10 times in the 2000-word essay. The student teacher also seems to be very much aware of the gap between discourses and actions, as was discussed during the course when Dervin’s model of intercultural competences (proteophilic competence, 2009) was presented: “So what I can say may not correspond with what I do or will say later. I can modify my dis[co]urse and act depending o[n] the situations, the person I am talking with, my mood, etc.” The latter quote is a direct paraphrase of one of the components of the competences.

Sophia’s hyper-reflexivity relates in general to:

- the use of concepts:

(13)

At the same time when I was writing my stories, I didn’t realize that I was using culture as explanation for what other people does or says, and, consequently falling in the trap of generalization and stereotypes

- the use of certain words (pronouns, subjective markers such as adjectives)

(14)

If I would write this story again I will not use the terms “intrigued, mysterious China, know people, their culture” (...) In addition, I would avoid the use of “their, them, ours, us.”

- assumptions that were made by the student teacher:

(15)

In the sentence “manners and politeness codes that differ from ours” I assume wrongly that all Chinese with the wide diversity share the same ways

(16)

What culture am I talking about? And which people? China is a diverse country (...) How can I get to know them all with all the differences that exist within the same group?

As we could see from these excerpts from the student teachers’ essays, they had all chosen a personal way to approach the intercultural. Sophia and Eija described how

their understanding of the intercultural has now changed and how they have learned to pay attention to their discourse and avoid using culture as an explanation for differences.

Conclusion

The approach to the intercultural that we have suggested and tested in relation to intercultural competences in this article is an attempt to help student teachers to “pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe” by rejecting solid, culturalist and acritical approaches. As we were able to read in the analysis of the focus groups and essays, the students were sometimes astonished at their own stories of how they had behaved previously and how they now understood that for example stereotypes and prejudice can completely change our preconceptions and expectations of people and our behavior and actions towards them.

The PICSTEP gives a possibility to use different ways of assessing the development of the student teachers’ intercultural competences throughout the students’ year in STEP. The five stories of memorable intercultural encounters that the students wrote before the multicultural lectures also served as initial diagnostic assessment of their understanding of the intercultural and intercultural competences, both for the instructor and the students’ themselves. The instructor can take this prior knowledge, experience and understanding into account when carrying out the lectures on multicultural education. The critical essays that the students wrote based on their own stories served as self-assessment of their development in their intercultural competences. The students reflected on the change or understanding of their own behaviour in intercultural relations and how the course and critical literature had affected their beliefs and perceptions about intercultural matters. For the instructor, the essay served as summative assessment of the completion of the multicultural education course as it was a way to assess the students’ understanding of the critical intercultural issues and how they were able to adopt them into their own experiences and hopefully adapt their future behaviour based on the newly-gained information. The grade the students received for the lecture course was based on their essays. However, it needs to be kept in mind that because the essays were graded – based on how the students constructed a coherent and critical line of argumentation around the idea of interculturality, it is of course possible that the students wrote the essays in a way that would show preferred changes in their ideas, beliefs and actions regarding the intercultural in order to be viewed more interculturally competent. Simultaneously the essay was a form of formative assessment of the development of the students’ thoughts and beliefs towards the intercultural during the course because the PIC was only about a half-way done by the end of the course. Furthermore, intercultural competences are not stable or fixed but they can and must be developed as part of life-long learning. Each person chooses at every encounter how we want to behave. Although we could behave interculturally appropriately in most instances, it can be our mood, will, attitude, etc. and those of our interlocutor that can make the encounter unproductive (see Dervin, 2012). Every encounter is co-orientational and thus both parties are responsible for the outcome (Callagher 2011).

As self-reflection is very important in teachers’ work, the student teachers are also taught to reflect on their skills that they learn and develop during their teacher education year and they are encouraged to continue doing so continuously in their work. Intercultural encounters are context-bound but when student teachers learn to reflect and critique their own discourses and behaviours – as seems to have happened

with the student teachers whose discourses were analysed in this article – they will hopefully be better able to work with diversity inside and outside of school. In our future work we need to find ways of infusing long-term observations of the students' intercultural competences and learn ways how they can further help their students in school to become more interculturally competent.

The four last components of the portfolio of intercultural competences stretch the students' work on intercultural issues throughout the rest of the pedagogical studies year. Although it is a short time span, it gives a chance for the authors to follow the students' progress further and see what developments, if any, the students' will have in their intercultural competences. It is also important to find out how students consider the intercultural and what kind of intercultural incidents they report of having encountered during their two school practices.

As has been discussed, it is difficult to assess and grade the development of a person's intercultural competences. We have thus emphasized formative assessment and continuous learning and followed the principle of recognition of intercultural competences (cf. Zarate and Radenkovic 2003).

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