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Intercultural encounters: A cross-Atlantic asynchronous web-mediated discussion on literary texts

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Abstract

This paper explores if and how cross-cultural web-based asynchronous interactive conversations can practically promote intercultural awareness. Student teacher students from Sweden and the US were given two literary texts to be discussed on a web platform. Discussion made students more culturally aware. This pilot provided fruitful insights and a foundation for further development of methods and practical design for future projects regarding, for example, choice of literary texts, instructions, teacher participation, time management, language and medium. This is a step towards intercultural learning methodology for teacher education and schools to educate intercultural citizens.

'It gave me ideas how to think'.
Swedish student

Introduction and aims

Our rapidly changing society constantly reminds us of global interdependence and the demand for understanding otherness. Today more than ever teachers must become aware of their roles as mediators between cultures.

However a well-known fact is that visions are easy to write but mean little unless put into practice. In our project we have tried to illustrate the educational idea of intercultural understanding to students from one American and one Swedish group of teacher students[1]. As the students participated in compulsory courses with an intercultural agenda they naturally demanded exemplary education. Besides the objective of personal intercultural awareness the project was intended as a pedagogical example for the students which was possible to use in their future teaching career. Accessible electronic communication offers practical potential for intercultural learning without the students having to leave their own study.

What I wanted to know was if a web-based asynchronic interactive conversation across the Atlantic in practice could promote intercultural understanding among pre-service teachers. Is this medium a potential way to enhance possibilities for an intercultural learning process?

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[1] I am greatly indebted to Dr Miryam Durante-Espinosa, Penn State University, PA and to her and my students. Without their help this project would never have been possible.

Theoretical background

Culture

As the idea of interculturality is crucial to our project what we mean by *culture* has to be defined. Culture includes nation, gender, class, race, ethnicity, physical ability, age, sexual preferences etc. According to Brian Street, culture is a meaning making process not a stage:

> In fact there is not much point in trying to say what culture is. What can be done, however, is to say what culture does. For what culture does is precisely the work of defining words, ideas, things and groups. We all live our lives in terms of definitions, names and categories that culture creates. The job of studying culture is not of finding and then accepting its definitions but of discovering how and what definitions are made, under what circumstances and for what reasons. These definitions are used, change and sometimes fall into disuse. Indeed, the very term "culture" itself, like these other ideas and definitions, changes its meanings and serve different often competing purposes at different times. Culture is an active process of meaning making and contest over definition, including its own definition. This, then, is what I mean by arguing that Culture is a verb (Street 1993, p. 25).

Interculturality

One theoretical starting point underpinning the study is to regard intercultural communication not as training, but as education leading to action. The educational objective is intercultural competence (IC) consisting of knowledge, skills and attitudes (Byram, 1997). There is an affective dimension as well as a cognitive one to IC. However, intercultural competence can be used for many purposes. Risager (2000) quite rightly points out that it can be used for commercial and political purposes to gain profits or advantages but as teachers we may see IC as a way to develop intercultural understanding, respect for otherness and to question your own values.

Learning and communication

According to socio-cultural theory with its origin from Vygotskian thinking and to cooperative learning students learn in interaction with others and the environment. The study also draws on dialogue theory based on Bakhtin and Dysthe (2002). Bakhtin´s view was that meaning and understanding are created where there is reciprocity of differences, where multiple voices struggle with another, argue or supplement each other (Dysthe, 2002). The interactivity in the web-mediated discussions is assumed to carry an intercultural learning potential. Dysthe (ibid) points out that this potential lies in the intersubjectivity. The postings of others generate new understanding and new thoughts.

As the discussion takes place on the web, Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) is a relevant paradigm (Koschmann, 1996). Koschmann stresses that

participation is not the same as interaction and dialogue. He differs between explicit interaction (dialogue) and independent statement (monologue). Not until the postings of others are used to expand and further develop thoughts to create new meaning is there a dialogue**.**

I argue that the fact that the students do not just talk or chat on-line about their writing is of importance. A student's written communication is interacting with him/herself. They get the chance to see their own texts at a distance; it becomes a means for self-reflection, introspection, and critical thinking**.**

The literary texts

The material upon which the student discussion was based consisted of two literary texts, extracts from two novels, an American and a Swedish one [2]. The stories are built on the authors' own experiences and tell about growing up as a minority child within a majority society. The American text was The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros. It is introduced by the publisher and Amazon.com on the web as:

> Told in a series of vignettes stunning for their eloquence, The House on Mango Street is Sandra Cisneros's greatly admired novel of a young girl growing up in the Latino section of Chicago. Acclaimed by critics, beloved by children, their parents and grandparents, taught everywhere from inner-city grade schools to universities across the country, and translated all over the world, it has entered the canon of coming-of-age classics.
>
> Sometimes heartbreaking, sometimes deeply joyous, (it) tells the story of Esperanza Cordero, whose neighbourhood is one of harsh realities and harsh beauty. Esperanza doesn't want to belong--not to her rundown neighbourhood, and not to the low expectations the world has for her. Esperanza's story is that of a young girl coming into her power, and inventing for herself what she will become.

The Swedish text was an extract from Mikael Niemi's Popular Music. His text was written in Swedish but for obvious reasons we used an English version. The fact that this book is translated implies a mediation, from author through interpreter to reader.

> When a Beatles record falls into the hands of 11-year-old Matti, neither he nor his home village of Pajala, Sweden, will ever be the same. It is the early 1960s, and both Matti and Pajala are about to enter adolescence. This is a beautiful, poignant, often very funny novel about growing up in a remote area. Niemi writes with real poetry as he strings together the culturally rich vignettes of Matti's experiences, snapshots of childhood that are at the same time intensely personal and universal. *Paula Luedtke, American Library Association.*

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[2] Niemi, M. (2003) *Popular music*. London: HarperCollins. First published in Swedish as Populärmusik från Vittula by Norsteds förlag in 2000. Chapter 1-2.
Cisneros, Sandra (1991) The House on Mango Street. New York : Vintage Books.(tba)

Participating students

Students were registered in two Teacher Education courses:

- Sweden: Cultural Encounters - compulsory course for undergraduate education. The course is offered both in Swedish and English, the data was collected with the English option.
- USA: Language/Culture: Issues for Practitioners - compulsory course for the Program Specialist: English as a Second Language Certificate

Name	Gender	Language	Age	Nationality	Postings	Entries
Charlotta	f	Swedish	25	Swedish	8	68
Frank	m	English	40	US	4	51
Kristin	f	Swedish	25	Swedish	6	66
Kristine	f	English	40+	US	6	52
Lena	f	Swedish	40	Swedish	9	88
LuzMarina	f	Spanish	30	Colombian	4	84
Patricia	f	English	20+	US	5	71
Rebecca	f	English	20+	US	8	93
Stephanie	f	English	20+	US	9	93
Stina	f	Swedish	25	Swedish	9	89
Teresita	f	Spanish	40	US/PuertoRico	5	69
Tina	f	English	40	US	17	93

Students' tasks

The students were given the following instructions:

1. Read the texts (handouts) and start a personal log (includes 2, 3, 4)
2. Write your short **personal response** to the texts as key words or key sentences (use it for your own thinking and include it in the log)
3. Pick about **3 sentences or short passages from each text** that you think are important. Give the reasons why you chose them. Publish in PingPong.
4. Exchange with your overseas net partner(s) your ideas and reflections that have emerged from your reading of the texts as well as a response to their/his/her ideas, 3-5 postings from each student
5. Reflect upon your partner's/partners' reading of the text in comparison with your own, how the discussion with your partner clarified/confused your own experience of the text (Please leave out any reflections on potential technical difficulties) This is an individual reflective piece of writing (2-3 pages)
6. Hand in as an assignment
   - Personal log of web discussion (2-4)
   - Reflective piece of writing (5)

The time schedule was very tight:

Tasks	Swedish students	US students
1-3	26 May :	26 May :
4	27-1 June	27-1 June
5	2 June	2 June
6	3 June 3pm	3 June 3pm

Students interactive web conversation. A few examples

The text of the author was a condition for getting any data (Cisnero, Niemi). Is there a text without a reader? The focus of the study is on the readers' texts and how they triggered new texts (reflections)

Different kinds of postings

1. Reader A picks a sentence from the literary text and motivates her/his personal choice, makes a posting and posts it all.
2. Reader B comments on 1
3. Reader A comments on 2
4. Reader C (D; E…) joins in etc

The recognition of the other

Esperanza and her situation:

> *And the story goes she (grandmother) never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window (Mango Street).*

> I understand the resentment that arises from being placed in positions that are not of personal choice. Feeling like one doesn't have control can be detrimental to how we see life. This is disheartening to me and oh so sad. I wish she could rise above this pain and find her way (student x).

Different kinds of comments

There were different kinds of comments to the story (Esperanza/Niila and her/his situation, other actors, symbols, style etc.

Personal experiences, like memories of childhood were triggered by the text. The students showed identification with the literary characters and their stories.

> *Someday I will have a best friend all my own. One I can tell my secrets to or who understands my jokes without having to explain them. ...Until then I am a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor (Mango Street).*

I could relate to this passage because I have a sister and even though there are some similar things about us, we are different, as different as night and day. I have always longed for a friend like a sister. One who listens to secrets and is not only a sister, but also a friend. One who you would truly want to be your maid of honour in your wedding. I have never had this until recently. I am in my early 40's and now I have a friend that I feel close to. I understand the comment that I am a red balloon. I am ready to fly, but my sister is anchoring me down. I do not get the support from her that allows me to fly. I am civil with my sister, but I would not tell her my innermost thoughts. (Tina)

Reactions to somebody's personal experience

Hello Tina! My name is Kristin and I'm from Sweden. I thought it was really interesting to read about the girl's longing for a best friend and how you recognized yourself in her thoughts. I did not think about that at all when I read the passage in the book, but that's because I have such good contact with my two older sisters and I can really understand your thoughts! It's amazing to have such good contact with a sister/friend and it's good that you have found a friend since you and your sister are so not alike. It's interesting how we can interpret a text so differently depending on our experiences. /Kristin

Personal experiences were triggered by somebody else's personal experience

The boys and the girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours. My brothers for example. They've got plenty to say to me and Nenny inside the house. But outside they can't be seen talking to girls. Carlos and Kiki are each other's best friend...not ours.
Strange that it was so impossible for boys to talk to girls, even their sisters./Lena

The quote relating to the relationship between boys and girls is easy for me to relate to. With a brother who is four years younger then me, my parents could never understand why we were able to get along and play together inside the house (for the most part anyway) and yet at school and outside we led to completely separate lives and socially unable or unwilling to talk to one another. In school, the ideal of "what is cool" seemed to take over and we found that it "wasn't cool" to talk to your older/younger brother or sister. /Stephanie

I would like to speak to the comment that you made about you and your brother being able to get along and play together inside the house but that you didn't necessarily socialize outside.
Being an only child and living with my mom who was a single parent, I didn't have much exposure to boys/men as I was growing up and as a result I still don't feel completely comfortable around men.
Even though you didn't socialize with your brother, I think it is such a positive that you got along with him as you were growing up. It is excellent experience for girls to spend time with male siblings and fathers who are good role models. I think it is also important that we teach our boys, (sons or male students) to treat women with

respect. Some of the students that I teach come from very male dominant cultures and there is a great deal of difference in their approach to male and female teachers. There is real disparity in what they learn at home and the behaviour that is expected of them at school. /Kristine

It is very interesting to read what you have written about boys and girls. When I was a child I never thought about things as girlish or boyish. I have a younger brother and we often played together with both boys and girls. I cannot remember that our parents treated us differently. As I grow up I realized that our society is not gender equal, but personally I have never been unfairly treated. Equality in a friendship or love relationship is self-evident to me. I guess that I've been lucky. /Stina

I consider very interesting the comment from Stephanie about her relationship with her brother because I had the same experience that Stina because we were two sisters and two brothers in my house and we share everything. It was great to be friend of our brothers' or my sister's friends! Besides our parents treated us equally and it was very difficult for me to see kids in the US who barely speak to their brothers or sisters. I love my brothers and my sister and no matter how far I am from them they are my best friends... yes Stina, I am very lucky too! /Luz

The students made frequent connections to their future teaching profession, and discussed their roles and relationship to students.

"Where do you live?" I pointed at the 3rd floor. "There." "You live there? There?" The way she said it made me feel like nothing. I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to (Mango Street).

This part makes me realise how damaging words can be. Sometimes it's not what we say, but how we say them. As a teacher, it makes me focus on making sure I do not lessen the self-esteem of my students in any way. I also get from this that we all want to be accepted and be proud of something. It is hurtful when someone else takes this from us./Tina

I like the way you have interpreted the passages. I found it interesting the way you have included your own feelings and emotions!
I agree that it is very important how you use words among people and perhaps more in the classroom. It is important that the pupils feel comfortable. Just as you say, it is not what you say, but how you say it that matters./Charlotta

the girl's teacher's reaction made our main character aware of her situation for the first time. I have not read the rest of the story, but I believe that this might be important for the whole story, what the girl strives for etc./Kristin

As a teacher this is very important because we should find out where our students come from in order to make them feel welcome and safe in our classrooms./Teresita

As i have been reading your passages i agree with what you say in almost all of them. however growing up in a poor family and realizing that many times teacher reactions to your living conditions is the difference between feeling ashamed of where you are from and realizing your potential. as in the story when her teacher's reaction was one of shock at where she lived. we as teachers need to keep in mind that regardless of where our students live and what living conditions are for them they must remain focused to learning and giving them the means to not have to feel ashamed or embarrassed by where they live. /Frank

She can't play with those Vargas kids or she'll turn out just like them. And since she comes right after me, she is my responsibility (Mango Street). This passage reminded me of the stereotypical views that parents and teachers can develop about certain kids based solely on their behaviour, personality, or general background. Unfortunately, as shown in the passage, these views are shared with children so that they too develop this stereotypical view. It also reminds me of the generalized roles of siblings in which the older sibling takes responsibility of younger siblings (student y).

Language and communication naturally interested these students, most of them being language teachers to-be:

She felt inferior. She wanted to give her children what she had never had. They would be real Swedes, and hence she wanted to teach them Swedish rather than her native Finnish. But as she knew practically no Swedish, she kept quiet (Popular music).
This poor woman does what she thinks is best for her children, not knowing how important it is to have a good mother-tongue in order to learn a second language. Finnish was also seen as an inferior language by the society and even forbidden to use in some schools, so it's not strange that she felt like this./Lena

I also feel that it is unfortunate that Niila's mother felt that it was better for her children to not learn Finnish based on a societal stereotype of inferiority. Unfortunately, this same idea tends to dominate not only the minds of those who speak these "inferior languages" but also in the minds of those who speak a dominant language. The concept of inferiority is unfortunately supported in most daily circumstances, which is why it is important for teachers to recognize the stereotype and encourage their students to overcome them and not fall under the same biased trap./Stephanie

When the web-discussion was over the students wrote reflections. They were all very positive. A proof for this conclusion:

Several advantages can be noted about the intercultural activity. First, as the name implies, it provided an opportunity for students in two different countries to share ideas with one another; technology is truly amazing! Secondly, all of the participants contributed thoughtful, meaningful comments to the discussion of the literary selections; in this sense, the activity provided another opportunity for people to engage in intellectual conversation, often times, and people do not have the

chance to do such a simple task. Finally, the intercultural activity provided a means to share ideas conveniently from our own homes during the times that worked best for us (Student)

Swedish students´ evaluations

Some oral comments from the Swedish students written down by me after an evaluation discussion:

- The goals of the activity were rather dim;
- As the discussion was web based it was very open and direct. We got straight on to the point without wasting time on 'polite circling around';
- More time needed for analyses, a bit superficial;
- US students gave no comments to texts only to our comments;
- Good, a personal touch. Advantage that you could pick and choose to answer the postings that interested you;
- Mango street arouse more personal feelings – about Niemi text we more discussed the book;
- Longer texts. Mango Street was too short and did not give enough opportunities for a variety of deep reflections. Everybody seemed to have picked the same passages. Naomi text was sufficient'
- A more 'typical Swedish' text. Naomi text is exotic even to most Swedes. Interesting that a US student recognized a similar mentality in a remote place in the US. Cultural differences between rooted routines in clans, generations, groups urban/rural within a nation. Small town mentality universal?
- A more focused discussion about professional issues (education) would be interesting. E.g. starting from a debate article in English;
- A female discussion. Would have liked a mixed group;
- We tended to look for national differences. Difference is more an individual feature.

Discussion of the results

Medium

The discussion immediately became personal and very open. The comments are 'brave', straightforward and characterised by nearness between the students though they had never met. They seemed free to open themselves very quickly though some had doubts about the medium before the start.

First, I thought that I may be unsuccessful with the basic operation of the PING-PONG computer system; after I successfully operated the system, I became uneasy about posting my interpretations of the selected works onto the message board. I was concerned that my thoughts on the subject matter would be perceived as "wrong", and since I barely knew my Penn State colleagues and the students at Jonkoping University were complete strangers, I did not want them to consider me uneducated or misguided. Despite my feelings of insecurity, I was also eager to try

a new experience, and I was curious to read the viewpoints of the other participants.

I am pleased to say that all of my initial negative concerns were completely unfounded and erased. In fact, participating in this event helped me to become more familiar with my Penn State classmates; it made me feel more connected with them because we shared a common experience. Regarding the interactions with the students from Jonkoping University, I felt immediately comfortable exchanging ideas with them. Each person I communicated with was respectful and was able to add to previously posted comments. Overall, I went away from this activity with feelings of confidence and satisfaction./Rebecca

Language of communication

The language of communication was English – In the Swedish group four of five were native Swedish speakers and had acquired English as a foreign language. In the US group four of seven were native English speakers, two had Spanish as her 1st language and one had Korean as her first language. To what extent was the English medium a constraint to the discussion?

Choice of texts

The project started in a flux due to travelling conditions and there was not much consideration taken about the choice of texts. However they fulfilled the criteria of multiculturality in story and were written by authors familiar with growing up in a minority. The Niemi story took place an environment even strange to Swedish students. They said at the oral evaluation that they would have recommended a more 'typically Swedish' text. The choice of texts has to be considered.

Time constraints

The different scheduling between the two institutions caused practical problems and rushed the project with a more unsatisfactory result for all partners – we only had about a week overlapping both courses - it created time constraints. Swedish students said at evaluation that the short time created shallow discussions and did not give them time to dig deeper into the texts and comments of others. The project has to be given enough time.

Analysis

A useful and easy model for analysing the students' texts remains to be considered. The postings of other students are used as means for individual thinking/self-reflection and collective creation of intercultural understanding. They seemed most helpful to start the students' thinking. Dialogue theory and theories of intercultural competence will presumably be useful.

Conclusion

Did this web-based discussion on literary texts promote intercultural understanding? Referring to the students´ postings I would like to reply in the affirmative, drawing on Byram's theoretical framework on intercultural competence and dialogue theory. Intercultural understanding is an interactive process and is developed in an encounter with a person or a text. The specific encounter told about in the article has been positive according to all the students involved. They have witnessed how they have gained new perspectives and their intercultural learning process has definitely advanced. My conclusions are that the students have taken steps forward exemplified by the following statement from one of the anticipating students. However my data remain to be further analysed.

> In conclusion, this experience was engaging due to the mere fact that we were communicating with students from Sweden. After these discussions, I am led to believe at our cultures are very similar. I feel that we both used critical thinking skills and were able to voice our opinions and thoughts and react to them. It was also very helpful to see how someone else interpreted the text because it gave me new perspectives to consider. Many times what someone else had to say, led me to question what I had read even more. /Tina.

Is this a possible way to enhance the possibilities for intercultural learning? Yes, with this pilot-project as a base and with the insights gained by it, I can see possibilities to learn more and to develop the methods if possible with teacher students from completely different cultures.

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