Designing a Course in Intercultural Education

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Abstract

There are a number of principles to be considered in the design of intercultural education courses. The existing intercultural experience that participants have built from early childhood must be recognised as a major resource. Interculturality is a reflexive awareness of Self and Other in a crossing of boundaries which resonates with C. Wright Mill's "sociological imagination." A critical cosmopolitan notion of the third space concept is employed as an open rather than an intermediary space—a creatively investigative space which enables us to work on finding ourselves as new and even more enriched selves across boundaries, and where all of us are hybrid. The focus should be on self among others rather than the nature of difference between national or other large cultures. This resonates with the radical agenda of cultural studies, where there is critical intervention against structures of prejudice, with particular attention to countering what I refer to as powerful essentialist West as steward and "West versus the rest" discourses of culture. There is therefore a postmodern and constructivist interrogation of ideological constructions of the intercultural that commonly push the recognition of important cultural realities to the margins. These principles are applied along with the need to learn how to avoid essentialist blocks and choose threads from our personal cultural trajectories that draw us together. The paper concludes with suggestions for intercultural education events that apply these principles. This is written in the inclusive third person to signal a final principle that intercultural educators are joining with their participants in working out their own interculturality.

Keywords: design, intercultural, cultural studies

Introduction

In this short paper, I am going to lay out a design for and thinking behind an intercultural education course. I believe that it breaks from tradition in that it builds very largely on what people bring with them from their existing intercultural experience, and how that experience and identity can develop as they interact with others, rather than focusing primarily on the particularities of the culture that people travel to and how that differs with where they come from. I will first lay out a number of principles,

and then describe a set of idealised pedagogic moves that attempt to apply the principles. There is not the space in this paper to provide a full review of intercultural education in the literature. This therefore represents a personal trajectory of thinking on the subject.

Existing Experience and Small Culture Formation on the Go

As an applied linguist with a background in language education, I am going to take the first principle, of recognising and building on the past, from my first experience of the communicative approach as set out by Breen and Candlin (1980)[1]. Language educators therefore communicate with the existing, underlying communicative competence and creative intelligence that their students bring with them, and which can be transferred to new language. There is an important moral principle here—that what students bring with them is a significant and major resource, for example, in Kumaravadivelu's (1993) criteria for good teaching, in Canagarajah's (2004) description of students subverting educational structures, and Norton and Williams's (2012) and Warschauer's (2011) accounts of learning digital literacy in under-resourced education settings. Students may not, however, be aware that they have these resources; and the role of the educator is to help them to recover and externalise that experience and learn how to employ it in new language domains.

The parallel with intercultural education is that we all bring with us an existing experience and competence in small culture formation on the go that we have developed from an early age. Prime examples of this are my very young grandchildren negotiating the cultural politics of mealtimes and then carrying that experience to the new cultural domains of kindergarten and primary school. What makes this competence and experience transferable is its locatedness in underlying universal cultural processes that we all share, and without which we would not be able to make any sense at all of new places that we go to. These are the core concepts within my grammar of culture, which is described most fully in Holliday (2013). They are embodied in personal cultural trajectories. They are the basis upon which we can, given the political opportunity, take action to negotiate the national and other structures within which we are brought up. Indeed, those structures become resources rather than essentialist definitions for who we are. I take this social action theory from Max Weber (1964). There is however a dark side that leads to cultural prejudice which I shall deal with below.

At a simple level, this approach amounts to working with personal cultural trajectories rather than national structures or large national cultures as the prime material. The job of intercultural education therefore becomes helping us to appreciate and mobilise the experiences and process that we bring with us. It took me a long and painful time, in my twenties, when I moved from Britain to Iran, to appreciate that learning to cope, as a child, with the strangeness of my grandmother's home and its very alien etiquettes of eating and playing would help me to work out how to live with my new, adopted family there. Good intercultural education would hopefully have speeded up that process and reduced the pitfalls. I have pointed out elsewhere that working with personal cultural trajectories in this way requires recalling and drawing connections between diverse events across different periods and places in our lives—relationships, encounters, moving locations, people, and practices (Holliday, 2016c, p. 1).

Interculturality, Social Imagination, Third Spaces, and Cultural Studies

This making sense of diverse experience brings me to the second principle, of interculturality. Here, I like the definition provided by Dervin (2016). It is purposefully tentative in the same way that my

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[1] This culturally responsive educational approach should not be confused with the highly culturally prescriptive, narrower, oral-based, sometimes termed "weak version" teaching method that, I have always argued, has hijacked the term "communicative" under the popular "CLT" label (Holliday, 2016a).

grammar of culture is purposefully messy and difficult to understand – because nothing about the intercultural can be or should be defined too closely. This takes us well and healthily away from any naïve positivist attempt to catalogue or quantify measurable intercultural competencies or skills (Holliday, 2016c). For Dervin, interculturality is getting rid of "differential" and "individualist biases," realising that it is an everyday struggle, looking at "exceptions, instabilities, and processes" rather than just national or ethnic structures, seeing "the importance of intersectionality," with justice at the centre, being reflexive, "paying attention to power differentials," being wary of "language use," and trying to "delve into the hidden," "under the surface of discourses and appearances" (2016, pp. 103-106). This notion of interculturality as a reflexive awareness of Self and Other in a crossing of boundaries resonates with C. Wright Mills's "sociological imagination," which involves being "aware of the idea of social structure and to use it with sensibility," "to be capable of tracing such linkages among a great variety of milieux" (Mills, 1970, p. 17). Social structure here refers to aspects of society that structure our experience and upbringing such as gender, class, political, educational, family, economic and legal systems, as well as narratives of Self and Other. This increases further the role of the educator as someone who can not only help students notice and see relationships and interconnections, but also understand their positionality in a wider world.

The third principle connects with the notions of third space and hybridity. Here it is important to move away from a soft-essentialist discourse of culture, in which the third space has commonly been perceived as an educational space where people from one large culture can be reflective about another large culture. The problem with this soft-essentialist interpretation of the third space is that there is still a sense of uncrossable boundaries between large cultures that make the best possibility a critical awareness of the Other in which "we" learn about who we are compared to "them," and there remains what Bhabha (1994, pp. 5, 56, 94) refers to as an "assumed or imposed hierarchy," "polarity" and colonial "fixity." Instead, it is necessary to get through these barriers and get to a critical cosmopolitan third space where "new relations of self, other and world develop in the moments of openness" (Delanty, 2006, p. 33), and where, as Homi Bhabha (1994, p. 56) and Stuart Hall (1996a, p. 619) remind us, hybridity is how we *all* are. We are therefore not looking for intercultural education that keeps us between cultural boundaries and enables us to do no more than look at, be appreciative of, and be tolerant of the Other. Instead we are looking for an openness of cultural travel in which we can be new selves in new domains. This sentiment is expressed in Ghahremani-Ghajar's inspiration for an Iranian primary school English language textbook in which children are encouraged to imagine that they can transport themselves to new lands where they can be themselves in new ways:

> Turtles are patient and curious, they take their time in water and land, they never worry about where to stay or where to rest because they walk with their homes on their backs! … The Turtle in our stories travels to different places, she talks to different people, she tells us about other people's stories, and she tells her own stories that are usually my/our stories too! (2009, p. 1)

The choice of turtles as the protagonists of travel is significant because we can at least imagine them unencumbered by the constructed structures of nation and imagined "national culture." In trying to detach English from the constructed particularities of "British" or "American" culture, turtles are also conveniently free of nationality and its ideological baggage (Ghahremani-Ghajar, personal communication).

Within the approach that I have so far described, one good example of materials that are used for intercultural education are those produced by IEREST (Intercultural education resources for Erasmus students and their teachers) for the purpose of supporting Erasmus students travelling to study across Europe. A defining characteristic is that they do not seek to prepare students for any particular place because this would fall into the essentialist trap of attempting to describe the details of a particular

cultural environment, which would be likely to be framed as an imagined "national culture" associated with a particular nation or country, but instead to help them to co-construct who they are in interaction with others beyond national identities (Beaven & Borghetti, 2015, pp. 8-14). The IEREST material therefore takes more of a cultural studies approach, in which there is a radical project to re-interrogate selves through a reflexive critique of established structures. This is therefore not an essentialist third space that looks out from one and into another bounded culture, but a creatively investigative space which enables us to work on finding ourselves as new and even more enriched selves across boundaries.

This aim, of understanding self among others, indeed fits with the pedagogic approach found in cultural studies as described by Blackman (2000). There are indeed very helpful links between the pedagogy of cultural studies and the sort of intercultural awareness agenda implicit in the IEREST materials:

> The original British cultural studies project was focused on a critical understanding of lived cultures and a consideration of people's experience and struggles and the forms of consciousness which established them as people. (Blackman, 2000, p. 62)

Combatting Structures and Prejudice

This brings me to the fourth principle, the need to combat prejudice, that can be associated with the structures and imposed hierarchies referred to above by Dervin, C. Wright Mills and Homi Bhabha. This is also recognised in the IEREST materials, where there is a section on racism within an anti-discrimination module (Beaven & Borghetti, 2015, p. 25). I referred earlier to the dark side of the cultural resources that we all have from the national structures within which are brought up. Among these resources are also grand narratives of nation and history that position us against each other. The cultural studies approach, driven by the work of Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, therefore seeks also to interrogate the power structures that oppress or alienate the cultural creativity of the individual – "'to rescue education from the influence of the ruling class'" (Blackman, 2000, p. 62, citing Marx & Engels), and to bring about "'critical intervention'" with regard to "'race, gender and sexual practice'" (p. 63, citing bell hooks). Moreover:

> There are also different levels of a radical project, for example where there are more students from working class and different ethnic backgrounds this can bring advantages allowing teaching to alter forms of consciousness (Blackman, 2000, p. 64).

"Working class" and "ethnic" need of course to be treated as contested terms; and, given that such contestation is included in any intercultural education curriculum, this radical sensitivity needs to be extended to the equally contested concept of the "non-West." Unlikely though it may be, in a world which is increasingly recognised as hybrid and multicultural, even where participants in intercultural education may all be centrally located in and only travelling between "Western" countries, they have to be introduced to the experience of the non-West. This is because the "West and the rest" conflict is at the centre of power and identity relations within the intercultural, where Western discourses have defined and marginalised the cultural realities of "the rest" of the world, often through a deficit frame (Hall, 1996b). There are, moreover, two powerful discourses of culture that drive this conflict and lead to massive distortion in the way in which the intercultural has commonly been represented. Informed by a critical cosmopolitan sociology (e.g., Delanty, Wodak, & Jones, 2008), I have named these as the West as steward and the "West versus the rest" discourses of culture (e.g., Holliday, 2016b).

The West as steward discourse states that people coming from outside the West learn everything that is of value *from* the West, because the culture that they come from, or bring with them, is somehow deficient. This discourse needs considerable unearthing, even to recognise that it is there, because it

also appears to take the moral high ground by claiming a supportive understanding of "other cultures." It in fact claims a monopoly of critical thinking skills related to everything described above and fails to recognise the creative criticality that is inherent in *all* cultural environments on the basis of the underlying universal cultural processes that we all share. The "West versus the rest" discourse is equally distorting in that it draws on exaggerated, essentialist, imagined, self-Othering, "non-Western" cultural traits, such as collectivism, to counter the Western monopoly of individualism and criticality – thus providing the West as steward discourse with its major excuse (e.g., Kim, 2005; Kumaravadivelu, 2012).

Radical intervention must therefore be a major ingredient of intercultural education because there is a dark side to small culture formation on the go (Holliday, 2013, p. 19). As well as a natural, creative, open side to underlying universal cultural processes, there are also powerfully tempting Self-Other, "us"-"them" of self-protection which will take on essentialist discourses of culture, taken in by the powerful grand narratives of "the West and the rest." Another core element of the grammar of culture is statements about culture, where people claim cultural exclusivity—"in my culture there isn't critical thinking"—often unawaredly, as a political projection rather than as a statement of actuality.

Intercultural education must therefore be postmodern and constructivist in that it appreciates the politics of how we socially construct cultural realities, and how these constructions are driven by ideology and discourses. It needs to focus on how much of the commonly held assumptions about the intercultural derive from a Western definition of the Other, and that there are rich yet unrecognised cultural realities that have been pushed to the margins (Hall, 1991). In recent interviews with newly arrived study abroad postgraduate students (Amadasi & Holliday, 2017, 2018), we have discovered that radical intervention quickly pushes our research participants to talk about intercultural richness that they initially denied, and also that we researchers are pushed by our research participants to reconsider our own positionality as everyone taking part in the interviews negotiate personal and grand narratives within a mutual process of small culture formation on the go.

Moving from Blocks to Threads

This brings me to my final principle, the need to move from blocks to threads as described in my revisiting of intercultural competence, where I state that intercultural education

> is activated by drawing threads of experience that can connect with the experiences of others. During cultural travel such threads can be pulled both from home to abroad and back again. (Holliday, 2016c, p. 1)

These threads are however constantly countered by essentialist blocks that operate in the other direction by establishing uncrossable boundaries that separate us. In the terms of the discussion so far, these boundaries are created by the Self and Other positioning that derives from essentialist discourses of culture and grand narratives of nation, but also from choices to think of each other as immutably different, and decisions to construct essentialist statements about culture within the process of small culture formation on the go. An example of this is where, instead of drawing common threads by talking to people I encounter in a café in Algiers about our common experience of visiting cafés, I create blocks by talking to them about how "Algerian culture" is "completely different" to "British culture" (Holliday, 2016c, p. 6). Helping us to choose threads rather than blocks should be the major focus of intercultural education.

Suggestions for a Sequence of Intercultural Education Events

The following is a series of suggestions for intercultural education events based on the above

principles. This is idealised in the sense that it is not based on experience of a real programme. The imagined participants would be people who are about to embark on intercultural travel or who already are engaged with intercultural experience. I prefer to leave the precise nature of the intercultural open because this is something to emerge rather than to be prescribed. I frame these events in the first-person plural, "we," because intercultural educators need, I feel, to be part of this process themselves. They may be expert in delivering pedagogy; but everyone involved is already expert in the intercultural. It therefore becomes a process of self-analysis and of externalising existing experience.

Recovering and exploring small culture experience

We should begin by taking ourselves back to our own experiences of encountering intercultural strangeness in our own society. This might be first days at school, a new job, or visiting the family next door. This would require raising awareness about how such past experiences are indeed intercultural and are building blocks of the competence that we can carry with us to new intercultural domains—requiring a sociological analysis of the deeper commonalities of cultural behaviour wherever we find it.

Recognising and dealing with blocks

We should explore what sort of prejudices, preconceptions and imaginations got in the way of understanding, and where these came from—national or other narratives, from school, from the media, from other people, from families and peers, and so on. Here, we are exploring the architecture of Othering—how we tend to imagine group behaviour that defines the individual. This might lead to recollections of how we ourselves feel we have been victims of this from other people, about how we have felt about this, and what we wanted people to know about us that they did not seem to appreciate. Here things might get complicated, because we will need to admit we can often exaggerate who we are to counter what others think of us through self-Othering, or strategic essentialism.

This might then lead to an analysis of how we think about the new place we are going to visit or the people we are encountering—where these thoughts come from and what impact they might have. This could involve some analysis of national grand narratives with which we are brought up through education, political ideologies and the dominant media, that caused us to position ourselves against other nations, ethnicities, minorities, migrants, religions and so on.

Turning then to the positive, which might be the hardest, we then need to work on how we can get around all of this baggage. The basic message here is that it is this baggage that gets in the way of intercultural understanding. We have to learn to understand that is not the nature of the culture that is the problem, that we all do culture in similar ways, but with different content and appearances, and that it is the prejudices about how we do culture that gets in the way.

Looking for threads

Here we should search for threads with which to connect with people. One place to begin might be recalling occasions when we have had breakthroughs with people with whom we felt we had nothing in common with, and how and when we discovered unexpected commonalities. We could then look at what sorts of things we talked about that helped to connect—family, jobs, identity issues.

Another place to look would be what we always imagine to be the core of "other cultures"—the most temptingly exotic—marriage ceremonies with costumes, roles, rituals, and so on. Here it would be good to explore our everyday feelings about such events that we consider "our own." To get around the grand narratives of history, rituals and symbols of civilisation, we could look at more practical

issues of what it is like to organise events, what goes wrong, anxieties about guests, expense, the micro-politics of who sits with who, who to invite, what to wear, and so on. These are the things that can be shared with people everywhere—the nuts and bolts and inner workings of these events as small culture formation on the go that we all recognise and share.

This means that when we encounter people and practices in new cultural environments, we discover that we already have a huge amount of knowledge about what is going on because those are people just like us who are struggling with and making sense of the daily business of small culture formation.

To Conclude

For the person, the professional, who carries out this sort of intercultural education, there might need to be a shift in how we characterise our professionalism to ourselves and others. We would no longer be experts in national cultural profiles, though knowledge of these would help us to deconstruct the ideologies and prejudicial discourses that underpin them. Our expertise would instead be in the realm of micro-sociology and cultural studies. And we ourselves might need some education in a postmodern critique of ideology, discourse and grand narratives.

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