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Internationalization and Intercultural Competence in Higher Education: Quality and Innovation

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Chapter 8

Intercultural virtual collaboration in perspective – Overall conclusions and developments from two international inter-university collaborations

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1. Introduction

Intercultural competence has become an essential tool to navigate everyday life in increasingly diverse communities and workplaces. Universities have been expanding efforts to offer their students the opportunity to develop such competence, not only through physical mobility, but also by including the development of it in their curricula, through active, collaborative and reflective practices. By adopting such approaches and pedagogical strategies to the development of students' intercultural competence, universities have been aiming to establish what has been called by experts in the field as "Internationalization at home" (Knight, 2004; Wachter, 2003).

In this context, technology has been key. Digital tools have not only allowed institutions to recruit students from all over the world to their online courses, but have also provided teachers with the opportunity to enrich the learning experience in their everyday classes with digital resources and with the possibility of having global interconnectedness from within the limits of classroom walls.

Intercultural virtual collaboration (IVC) has been employed by teachers and institutions to connect students from different

locations to develop different kinds of learning outcomes. The practice can be found in literature under a vast array of labels (O'Dowd, 2018): Telecollaboration (Guth, Helm and O'Dowd, 2012), Online Intercultural Exchange (O'Dowd and Lewis, 2016); Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) (Guth and Rubin, 2015); Networked Learning (McConnell, Hodgson and Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2011); Global Virtual Teams (GVT) (Taras *et al.*, 2013) and probably others. According to O'Dowd and Dooly (2020), "all definitions intend to highlight both the medium (virtual, online, digital, distance, global, networked) and the underlying purpose (exchange, intercultural, collaboration, learning)" (p. 362).

Having emerged at the turn of the millennium (Helm and Guth, 2010), IVC has been shown to achieve different pedagogical goals (like intercultural competence development, language-learning and digital literacies) and, since 2020, in face of the extraordinary circumstances imposed by the COVID-19 epidemic, it has even been seen as a tool "to offer students an international and intercultural experience today when mobility is not actually possible, and to prepare students for quality mobility experiences in the future" (Helm, 2020).

Still, disregarding its pedagogical potential, IVC is currently quite far from becoming an established practice in Higher Education given the complexity involved in its implementation:

> What sets it apart from other online approaches is precisely what makes starting and scaling new programs complex. Whether they are classroom-based or peer-to-peer conversations, meaningful experiences require intentional facilitation and authentic tasks. They also have components to help students prepare, work together, and then debrief after a project. And if the goal is to foster the same kinds of serendipitous experiences that come from in-person international learning, all these tasks - preparation, facilitation, collaboration, and reflection - must be more intentional. (NAFSA, n.d.)

For this reason, there is a need for sharing evidence of applied models and tools that can be replicated by IVC practitioners (Crossman and Bordia, 2012; Ferreira-Lopes and Van Rompay-Bartels, 2020; Helm, 2015) and that can inform policy makers on the ways ICV can be successfully integrated into university

curricula (Garcés and O'Dowd, 2020). Considering this, this chapter presents overall conclusions about the implementation of a task sequence teaching-learning strategy for the development of intercultural competence in Higher Education through intercultural virtual collaboration with the final objective of facilitating the work of teachers when integrating IVC into Higher Education studies.

Before we finally reach such conclusions, in the next section we will briefly discuss the use of tasks in virtual collaborative environments and describe the main characteristics of the task-sequence analysed.

2. A task sequence proposal for intercultural virtual collaboration

Finding its roots in language teaching, the task-based approach to education has been evolving for the last 30 years. Drawing its theoretical foundations from classical educational philosophies such as social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1962) and 'learning by doing' (Dewey, 1938), the task-based approach primes experience, interactions and authenticity

Skehan (1998) defines the four main characteristics of a task as being: (a) exchange of meaning is primary; (b) there should be a common goal to be achieved; (c) the outcome in sight is whether the learners were able or not to achieve such an objective; and (d) the task performed should resemble real-world situations. Other definitions of task also emphasize the role of teachers in structuring and sequencing interactions, as well as on regulating them (Lee, 2000).

According to Lai and Li (2011), "the introduction of technology into this equation enlarges the number of venues and resources for task performance" (p. 501). In the computer-mediated context, they define tasks as "holistic activities in which learners make use of their language and (cross-)cultural and communicative resources to achieve some nonlinguistic outcome through stretching their linguistic, (cross-)cultural, internet-based communication, and digital literacy skills" (p. 501). By using technology to connect students from different locations, intercultur-

al virtual collaboration breaks the limitations imposed by physical separateness and allows for real-life interaction between different cultures, carrying with it the potential to enhance the authenticity of tasks that aim to develop intercultural and linguistic competences. As Woo *et al.* (2007) explain,

> Before the widespread diffusion of computers and Internet technologies, it was much more difficult—and in some situations even impossible—for instructors or instructional designers to use authentic activities in real-life settings because of the limitations of the subject matter, time and finances, and practical constraints and risks of physically moving students to fields of practice. With the development of web technology, such limitations have eased. (p. 37)

However, in complex environments such as those involved in intercultural virtual collaboration, different variables (pedagogy, technology, language and culture) interplay and, with this, task-design assumes a pivotal role (Kurek and Müller-Hartmann, 2017). In this regard, Kurek (2015) defends that "the greater the complexity of a learning environment, the more learning opportunities it may generate, if only learners' activity is framed with adequate tasks" (p. 17).

In terms of instructional design, the typology of tasks identified by the seminal work of O'Dowd and Ware (2009) has been widely used by intercultural virtual collaboration researchers and practitioners. Such authors synthesized the variety of tasks used in telecollaboration into three main categories: the first category is composed of (1) information exchange tasks. These tasks usually require little negotiation and consist of partners introducing themselves to each other by providing information about their own cultures and interests. The second type of tasks is (2) comparison and analysis of cultures and demands a little more from students by asking them to make a critical analysis of cultural products (e.g. newspapers, magazines, books, etc.) and finding similarities and differences between them. The last category is (3) collaborative tasks, which require students to go further in collaboration by requesting them to produce a joint product or conclusion together. After analysing a number of studies that fall under each of the categories mentioned, O'Dowd and Ware (2009) concluded that combining different types of

tasks in a sequence can expose students to different aspects of intercultural communication and allow educators to set diverse learning objectives in an online exchange.

By having the typology of O'Dowd and Ware (2009) as a main reference and based on other previous literature in the field of telecollaboration, in her doctoral work Ferreira-Lopes (2021) proposes a detailed task sequence (Figure 1) for the development of intercultural competence through intercultural virtual collaboration. The sequence is composed of four tasks, each of them followed by reflection exercises. The full proposal of the referred sequence can be found in Ferreira-Lopes, Bezanilla and

Figure 1. Task-sequence proposed by Ferreira-Lopes, Bezanilla and Elexpuru (2018)

Elexpuru (2018). In this publication, the authors describe how the sequence was built in a way that the notion of community/group is gradually constructed between members, with tasks growing from the preliminary exchange of personal information to more intense and demanding forms of collaboration. They also provide considerations to support teachers in the pre-implementation set-up process and suggest the use of user-friendly technology tools, as well as of a multi-method assessment strategy (with different types of assessment tools) to better capture students' intercultural competence development.

In order to analyse the effect of the proposed task sequence in students' development of intercultural competence and to explore how much students enjoy participating in each task, the referred task sequence was implemented in two different IVC projects. First, in 2016, a pilot implementation was carried out in a master programme involving universities from two different countries (Spain and France). Then, in 2017, another implementation took place in a project involving undergraduate Business students from Spain and undergraduate Business students from Holland. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected from such implementation through pre-posttests, after-task questionnaires and a final satisfaction survey.

3. Overall conclusions and developments

The task sequence previously presented proved to be operationalizable in practice as it was implemented in two different Business courses at different academic levels (in undergraduate studies and in a master programme) and with partnerships involving different institutions and countries. The experience in both implementations showed that having a 'pre-packaged' and concrete pedagogical strategy at hand facilitated discussions and allowed agreements between collaborating universities and teachers to depart from a more advanced stage (Ferreira-Lopes *et al.*, 2019).

An analysis of the results of the second implementation also showed that, according to students' perceptions (Ferreira-Lopes, Elexpuru and Bezanilla, 2021), the most developed intercultural competence indicators across the sequence related to developing a positive attitude towards intercultural relationships and to de-

veloping skills to work in diverse teams. Other indicators that students reported to have been very much developed by the sequence were related to intercultural knowledge, intercultural awareness, intercultural relationship building and intercultural teamwork[1]. In addition, results revealed that a vast majority of students very much enjoyed participating in all the tasks from the sequence and nearly all students would recommend the telecollaborative project to be implemented again with new students. When asked about what they most liked about the project, students mostly reported their excitement with the opportunity of working in intercultural teams, of gaining cultural knowledge and highlighted the real-life application of the project. On the other hand, workload, some aspects of instructional design (specific tasks, task length and instructions), and misunderstandings in the group were the issues that students least liked about the sequence (Ferreira-Lopes and Van Rompay-Bartels, 2020).

As it demonstrated to be applicable in practice, well-perceived by students and effective in developing different intercultural competence building blocks and configurations, the task sequence proposed proved to facilitate the integration of intercultural virtual collaboration into the university curriculum and became a sustainable and integral part of both the master programme in which the pilot took place and in the two undergraduate courses involved in the final implementation. As such, it has been successively applied in the programmes referred to in the academic years that followed the first implementations. In the case of the IVC project involving Spain and Holland, the high satisfaction of all those involved with the initiative caused

1. The study adopted the Erasmus Mundus Intercultural Competence model (EMIC, 2015) to serve as a reference for the definition, development and measurement of intercultural competence in the Higher Education context. The EMIC model defends that intercultural competence is a multidimensional concept composed of building blocks (knowledge, awareness, attitudes and skills), supporting capacities (emotional intelligence and critical reflection), a meta-capacity (developing intercultural competence) and three interrelated competence configurations or sub-competences (intercultural teamwork, intercultural conflict management and intercultural relationship building). In order to better suit EMIC to the online work that takes place in intercultural virtual collaborative environments, the doctoral research also proposed the addition of a new configuration (intercultural virtual teamwork) and four related indicators to the original composition of the model.

the project to collaborate in different ways since its first implementation:

- *Increase in the number of participating students*: in the Netherlands, the number of participating students increased in the implementation that followed the first project, allowing groups to have a better balance of members from both locations;
- *Adaptation/replication of the task sequence in other IVC projects*: the task sequence proposed herein was adapted and used by the Dutch teacher in another similar exchange held in partnership with a university in the United States;
- *Integration of a new partner*: in the implementation that took place in the academic term of September 2020-January 2021, a third university from South America was integrated into the project, enriching it with another cultural perspective;
- *Broadening the concept of intercultural competence*: also in the implementation of 2020, teachers decided to start to incorporate some principles of global citizenship (Byram, 2008; Council of Europe, 2016) into the project by inviting students to discuss in the intercultural virtual groups, as part of the final assignment, how the COVID situation has been addressed by governments in the countries represented in the group and to reflect on how such approaches have impacted everyday life and businesses in such places. Although the task does not reach a deep level of active engagement in society – which is the ultimate goal of global citizenship (O'Dowd, 2019) – it does aim at "encouraging learners to engage with themes which are of social and political relevance in both partners' societies" (p. 11).

Future projects could go deeper into and beyond these aspects, showing in what ways the task sequence proposed in this work can evolve and exploring the implications that such developments might have on students' intercultural competence and satisfaction. Especially with regards to approaching the concept of global citizenship, there is a lot of room for improving the collaborative tasks of the sequence in order to engage students in intercultural dialogical and critical processes that might lead them to actively take part in societal issues.

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