

‘Intercultural Competence’ as an intersubjective process: A reply to ‘essentialism’

Vivien Xiaowei Zhou^{a*} and Nick Pilcher^b

^aThe Business School, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, UK; ^bThe Business School, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, UK

Contact details of corresponding author:

Edinburgh Napier University
The Business School
219 Colinton Road
Edinburgh EH14 1DJ
01314554527
v.zhou@napier.ac.uk

Vivien Xiaowei Zhou is Lecturer in Intercultural Communication in the Business School, Edinburgh Napier University, where she is Deputy Programme Leader for MSc Intercultural Business Communication (and with TESOL). Her research interests include Intercultural Communication and Education, Narrative Inquiry and Researching Multilingually.

Nick Pilcher is Lecturer and Programme Leader for the MSc in Intercultural Business Communication (and with TESOL) and teaches writing in academic subjects. He researches around language, education and qualitative methods. He has contributed to work published in journals such as *Qualitative Research*, *Power and Education*, *The International Journal of Shipping and Transport Logistics* and *The European Journal of Engineering Education*.

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Current intercultural education paradigms are commonly grounded in structuralist competence-oriented tenets, and introspective reflection is sometimes employed to help individuals move towards acquiring these tenets for successful ‘intercultural competence’ (ICC). There exists a received notion that equates ICC with the acquisition of particular attributes such as respect, tolerance and empathy, and reflection is promoted by some as a key facilitator in this process. In this paper we argue that there are many issues related with such approaches and notions. We draw on data from four students’ intersubjectively constructed reflective essays, conveying their ICC experiences throughout an interdependent group work assessment on an ICC module. These experiences show highly complex journeys, sometimes evidencing ICC attributes, but often indicating alternative ICC criteria individually developed by the students. Furthermore, reflection was often painful and at times led to a ‘falling back on’ essentialist notions of culture. Yet, it was precisely these types of experience that helped facilitate deep engagement with ICC. We argue that rather than reject essentialist notions of culture as a ‘simplistic’ starting point, they could be tackled head on and used critically throughout intercultural learning. Importantly, they should be recognized as existing symbiotically with non-essentialist notions.

当今的跨文化教育模式通常以结构主义的能力培养为宗旨，时常用内省反思的方法帮助人们培养成功的跨文化能力（ICC）。此种教育模式基于一种普遍接纳的观念，即跨文化能力等同于习得包括尊重态度、宽容心和共情能力在内的特质。有些教育工作者认为反思对这些特质的培养能起到重要的辅助作用。在此文中，我们探讨这种理念和方法背后的复杂问题，并用四个学生基于不同主体间互动所撰写的反思性论文举例。这些论文以他们在一门跨文化能力课程中开展的以培养个人跨文化能力为目的的团队任务为主题，描述了他们复杂的心路历程。他们的个人反思有时指向上述特质，但更多地揭示了他们从自身经历中衍生出的评判跨文化能力的个体标

准。此外，反思往往是痛苦的，并且有时导致对本质主义文化观的‘回归’。然而，正是得益于这种经历，学生们能够对跨文化能力进行真正的深度探索。我们认为，与其将本质主义文化观（作为‘肤浅简单’的认知起点）彻底抛弃，我们或可考虑在跨文化教学的整个过程中面对它，对其进行批判性运用，并且——尤为重要的一点——看到本质主义文化观与非本质主义文化观之间的共生关系。

Keywords: intercultural competence; essentialism; non-essentialism; reflection; experiential learning

Introduction

I genuinely believe, reading back on my first log entries, that our group came a long way in becoming a textbook ICC success story ... The surprising thing is how naturally it happened.

I believe the pressure of aiming for a good grade has influenced my development of mindfulness. True ‘Mindfulness’ ... can only be developed when a person is willing to know, to ask, to find out and to learn (Inquiry) which was not given as I was not willing to try something new, mainly because I wanted to pass the assignment.

The above are from two students’ reflective essays on a group-based assignment for an Intercultural Competence (hereafter ‘ICC’) module. Collectively, these writings present a kaleidoscope of unique, deeply personalised trajectories of ‘ICC development’. Using reflection echoes a strand of intercultural education practice highlighting self-contemplation as a valuable path to ‘(enhanced) ICC’ (for examples of this strand, see Nagata, 2004; Jackson, 2011; Holmes & O’Neill, 2012; Jaidev, 2014; Méndez García, 2017). Such self-contemplation, often termed ‘(self-)reflection’ or ‘(self-)reflexivity’, is

often hoped to bridge theory and practice (e.g. Nagata, 2004) by providing holistic, transformative alternatives to more fact-based, ‘content-competences’ informed training (Blasco, 2012). However, Blasco (2012) cautions that uncritical ‘positive bias towards reflexivity’ may defeat intercultural educators’ intended purposes, and ‘risks becoming a placebo for some... more complex and intractable problems in intercultural learning’ (p.476). In this paper, we draw on our students’ reflective essays to examine complexities emerging from the pedagogical space where ICC and reflection are connected. We present four cases in detail, discussing potential benefits and challenges of using reflection for ‘ICC development’; and multifaceted issues surrounding what Ferri (2014) calls the ‘intercultural industry’. We argue that considering such complex realities means we tackle issues we ourselves may be uncomfortable with head on (such as the perennial appeal of essentialist approaches to the industry), to the benefit, we argue, of pedagogical depth and quality. We end with some suggestions and questions for meaningful engagement with these complexities.

The evolution of intercultural education paradigms

Intercultural education has long been dominated by competence-oriented traditions, emanating from essentialist conceptualisations of culture fixating communication behaviour upon shared characteristics of monolithic entities (e.g. countries, ethnicities) and, according to Ferri (2016), a Kantian conception of the self as ‘moral legislator, according to the dictates of the moral imperative guided by reason’ (p.101). Thus, earlier efforts to theorise about intercultural communication feature a polarised self/other framework typically conceived at group levels (e.g. national cultural dimensions developed by Hofstede, 2001), focusing on differences between discrete cultures as *a priori* reasons, or ‘ontological knowledge of the other’ (Ferri, 2016, p.101), for explaining events in intercultural communication. This leads intercultural

educators to functionalist approaches (Ferri, 2014) foregrounding empirical evidence of cultural differences as cognitive conditions for ‘good’ intercultural communication. Such communication emphasises interlocutors’ behavioural skills to adapt to different cultures’ ‘norms’, and posits the ethical relation between self and other in terms of mutual respect, tolerance, and empathy. This orientation is manifest in many existing ICC definitions or related terms, used as a conceptual basis for much research, practice and policies. For example:

ICC refers to ‘the ability to effectively and appropriately interact in an intercultural situation of context’. (Perry & Southwell, 2011, p. 453)

Intercultural dialogue... aims to develop a deeper understanding of diverse worldviews and practices, to increase co-operation and participation (or the freedom to make choices), to allow personal growth and transformation, and to promote tolerance and respect for the other. (Council of Europe, 2008, p.17)

This functionalist orientation has prompted scholarly efforts to determine ICC by lists of attributes (for a comprehensive overview see Deardoff, 2006), presenting ICC as a knowable, palpable, and measurable ‘thing’, seemingly marking a complete, final state of ‘fulfilment’ and ‘goodness’ (see Ferri, 2016 for a philosophical deconstruction in relation to the work of Derrida and Levinas). Intercultural learning is commonly modelled as a relatively linear process of staged personal development (e.g. Bennett, 1986) where learners progress towards a state showing attributes closely resembling those possessed by the ‘ideal intercultural interlocutor’. This structuralist approach to intercultural learning, with its straightforward transferability to learning objectives and outcomes, forms a conceptual basis for what Ferri (2014) calls the ‘intercultural industry’. Here, education and training revolve around practical application of empirical knowledge and skills, reduction of cultural misunderstandings, and conflict resolution.

Such programmes are still common in current educational spheres, propelled by economic motives emphasising interlinks between learning and ‘socio-economic achievement’ (Bills, 2004), and political agendas promoting ‘equality’ and ‘democracy’ through managing ‘difference’ as a source of social friction (Phipps, 2014).

Nevertheless, emerging critical scholarship attempts to offer broader development than competency-based models (Phipps, 2013). Drawing on post-colonial and post-structuralist approaches (e.g. Bhabha, 2012; Deleuze & Guattari, 1988), it highlights interlocutors’ agency and subject-positioning, the hybridity of intercultural encounters, and the multiplicity, intersectionality and performativity of identities (e.g. Holliday, 1999, 2011; Kramsch, 2009). Some also contend traditional competence-based models, with much vaunted attributes of cultural awareness, tolerance and respect, only give ‘the appearance of sweetness and niceness’ and, worryingly, may ‘bring false hope’ and even perpetuate inequality (Phipps, 2014; Szkudlarek, 2009). Within broader discussions on intercultural ethics (MacDonald & O’Regan, 2013; Phipps, 2013; Ferri, 2014), such scholarship questions the adequacy of traditional aims of intercultural education vis-à-vis structural inequalities and power asymmetries inherent in contexts where much intercultural communication occurs, calling for approaches prioritising the ‘inter’ over ‘culture’, the concrete ‘other’ over an abstract ‘other’, and dialogic engagement over simple tolerance (Ferri, 2014, 2016; Phipps, 2014; Dervin, 2016). Thus, some advocate that intercultural education should sensitise students to, rather than protect them from, the complex phenomena briefly reviewed here (Dervin, 2016; Szkudlarek, 2009). Specific suggestions include cultivating students’ humility towards possible failure to establish dialogue (Ferri, 2016), the impossibility of understanding the other (Szkudlarek, 2009), or overcoming tendencies to essentialise the other, meanwhile encouraging conscious striving towards complex

understandings of intercultural situations (Dervin, 2016). Further, it is advocated that learning activities should prepare students, experientially, for uncertainties, help them become accustomed to discomfort and failure, and engage them in reflexive learning (Dervin, 2016).

REL in intercultural education

Integral to intercultural educators' pedagogical exploration of post-structuralist and post-method alternatives, reflective experiential learning (hereafter 'REL') is now practiced in many forms including ethnographic, autobiographical, and mindful inquiries situated in study abroad or multicultural group assignment contexts (e.g. Nagata, 2004; Jackson, 2011; Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Jaidev, 2014; Holmes, Bavieri, Ganassin & Murphy, 2016; Méndez García, 2017). Compared with cognitive studies of abstractions about cultural difference, REL may offer greater authenticity, as students have contact with cultural others and engage in contemplation specifically directed towards their selves. This approach is believed to potentially bridge theory and practice (Nagata, 2004), and address processual aspects of intercultural learning, thus being integral to intercultural praxis (Sorrels, 2014).

Literature on REL's transformative power predominantly displays positive accounts, e.g. helping 'nurture the traits and attributes most commonly associated with ethical intercultural communication' (Jackson, 2011, p.81). It is felt to enhance students' 'relational abilities', create 'a perceived shift towards others in terms of flexibility and adaptability' (Holmes, Bavieri, Ganassin & Murphy, 2016, p.463), and contribute to 'deep learning' (Jaidev, 2014, p.138). However, several issues remain.

First, while Blasco (2012) notes some practitioners see reflexivity a goal in itself, we find the practice of REL often documented as a *means* to acquiring certain intercultural attributes (as shown in the quotes above), entailing a presupposed

‘destination’ for ICC. Furthermore, REL is usually guided whereby key notions such as ‘cultural difference’ and ‘cultural others’ are either loosely defined, e.g. ‘someone from another culture’ (Holmes and O’Neill, 2012), or framed through juxtaposing ‘local’/‘host’/‘home’ and ‘international’ (e.g. Holmes, Bavieri, Ganassin & Murphy, 2016), argued by some to be solidifying and divisive categories rooted in essentialist thinking (Dervin, 2016; Holliday, 2016). Arguably, especially in post-structuralist perspectives, such uses limit, restrict, and pose a problematic contradiction when we aim to direct students away from essentialist understandings of intercultural phenomena.

Furthermore, REL’s ‘effectiveness’ lacks empirical support. Research and pedagogical papers documenting REL practices commonly present extracts from students’ reflections-*on-action* (in contrast to reflection-*in-action*) (Schön, 1983), conducted in *posterior* of intercultural experiences and articulated mainly through concepts denoting desirable ICC attributes. For example, from Jackson’s (2011) Chinese-speaking participant’s reflections:

During the trip, through interacting with English people, I became *aware of our behavioral differences*. By looking at the reasons behind them, I *discovered I am deeply influenced* by Chinese traditional values and I love Chinese culture very much. I also *appreciate* English culture, too. After this realization, I *started to perceive myself* as a Chinese who is *open* to the influence of other good cultural values . . . Spending time abroad has given me *a different perspective* on China and Hong Kong. I’ve also become more *self-aware* and *independent*. (Jackson, 2011, p.91-92) (our italics)

Similarly, Holmes, Bavieri, Ganassin, & Murphy (2016) note participants’ explicit references to concepts of ‘critical self-questioning’, ‘empathy’, ‘tolerance’ and ‘mutual understanding’, and tentatively interpret them to evidence participants’ self-development as critical intercultural citizens. The higher-order analytical abstraction featured in such data leaves open the question whether such data actually supports

genuine improvement resulting from reflection, or merely presents self-fulfilling prophecies about 'better learning outcomes ... taken as a matter of faith' (Akbari, 2007). Possibly REL may be a placebo, allowing us to feel we have 'dealt with' complexities, and can continue 'as we are'. Yet, when students enter the wider world as intercultural citizens or professional practitioners in related fields, can we be sure we have addressed the complexities involved, and, importantly, that they will resist the allure of essentialist approaches and quick-fix solutions in personal and professional practice?

A further problematic aspect of REL concerns an underlying Cartesian view of the self (Blasco, 2012) where it is assumed stable, accessible, transcendable, and capable of fixing its own prejudices in relation to a 'fixed, knowable other' (p. 476) deprived of spatial and temporal contexts. Blasco (2012) argues the assumed emancipatory power of reflective activities grounded in such views may reinforce autopoietic 'inner consultancy', with answers sought within the self alone and 'ambivalent' or 'risky' zones avoided. Such 'ambivalent' or 'risky' zones rarely feature in the REL literature. Any 'failures' are commonly bypassed as minor individual cases rather than explored in depth. For example, Nagata (2004) notes four of 125 students were uncomfortable with Bodymindfulness Practice, but that rather than provide discouragement or desire to explore the underpinning reasons for this result, 'it motivates me to find better, more inclusive ways to use this approach in the future' (p.156).

Theoretical critiques and occasional negative cases in the literature lead us to a further concern about the locale REL is usually conducted. We find documented REL practices mostly occurring where, in Phipps' (2014) words, equality is structured into students' intercultural encounters. Examples include planned meetings with individuals from different cultures to inquire into 'their communication, culture, customs, attitudes

and behaviour' (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012), 'exposure to the local culture and language [through living] with a host family', exploration of 'their surroundings' and 'cultural scene' (Jackson, 2011), and exchange of perspectives through group discussions of classroom exercises (Nagata, 2004). In such locales, students interact with cultural others in relationships more akin to those between observers and observed, than of interdependence. Such 'a non-threatening, low-stress environment' for students to 'express their thoughts on intercultural communication freely' is considered desirable for intercultural learning by some (e.g. Jaidev, 2014, p.137). However, although they can promote useful reflection, 'neutral' intercultural encounters occurring in such carefully controlled settings and mainly driven by good will and friendliness are arguably removed from actual intercultural communication in our increasingly interconnected world, where competing priorities, incommensurable ideologies, and power differentials are likely to exist.

In this paper, we now focus on some postgraduate students' experiences in an ICC module in our own teaching context. We explore their reflections on experiential engagement with 'developing ICC', broadly guided by three questions:

- (1) Is there discernible evidence for any changes in the students' 'ICC' during their experiential learning?
- (2) What role does REL play in their changing, or non-changing, 'ICC'?
- (3) How do students construct the concept of 'ICC (development)' at the end of their experiential learning?

The ICC module

The aim of this module, run in a Business School, was set to 'enhance students' competence in dealing with cultural diversity by harnessing intercultural opportunities

within it, especially through reflective dialogue'. One author was module leader and the other taught on the same Masters programme. The module was taught in English to multinational students (e.g. Germany, Italy, France, China, UK, Poland, USA, Russia). Students explored theorisations and approaches to developing ICC through lectures and independent reading. In parallel, considerable time was spent on group work (in groups of four or five) to complete two collaborative projects. The first was a 3000-word written report, where students, as groups of 'intercultural consultants', proposed 'how to manage an emerging culturally diverse workplace' to an imagined company expanding overseas. This project assessed students' general academic skills, particularly literature review, critical thinking, and writing, whilst providing an opportunity to experience intercultural interactions. Next, the same groups conducted needs analyses with guest 'trainees' from the real world, designed one-hour-long intercultural training sessions accordingly, performed the training with the 'trainees', and evaluated its effectiveness drawing on post-training feedback. Alongside its explicit 'intercultural' focus in line with the module aims, this project encouraged students to interculturally engage with group members in various ways beyond desktop research. Considered in relation to the main module aim and complex factors affecting the outcome of students' training activities (e.g. the number, availability, and participation of guest 'trainees'), this project was assessed not on the groups or their training activities *per se*, but on each student's reflective essays (around 4000 words) on their personalised ICC learning journeys through this group work.

The module assessment was structured so that students interacted with interdependence, primarily for intercultural learning but also to complete assignments. In their reflective essays, students used two sources of 'evidence': 'learning journals' written through the group work on the two collaborative activities (for *in situ*

reflection), and comments from two ‘critical friends’ they had shown these learning journals to (to help aid later *post hoc* reflection). The ‘critical friends’ were ‘anyone other than students undertaking the same module, who are willing to read the students’ learning journals, either in part or in full, to offer an open, respectful, and usefully critical commentary’. The exercise of intersubjectively constructing learning experiences aimed to offer students a hermeneutic possibility to generate new meanings from ‘old’ experiences, thereby moving towards intercultural learning.

Students on this module were from different Masters programmes (in intercultural communication, international marketing, and international event management). Some had taken another Intercultural Communication module in the previous semester, whereas for others it was relatively new. This issue was raised early, with students encouraged to view it as part of their experiential learning in a ‘culturally diverse’ environment, for example, by considering it when choosing their group members.

Data exploration

The data we explore in this paper are from four students’ reflective essays selected from a possible total of 59 from different cohorts over three years. Of these 59 students, we gained ethical approval from ten for using their reflective essays (i.e. their final submitted work combining both *in situ* and *post hoc* reflections) in our study. Although we consider it equally interesting to draw thematic insights across this data set, we decided to use a narrative approach (cf. Chase, 2011) to foreground the rich detail of students’ personalised trajectories of ‘ICC development’ as individual cases. In order to do this within the limits of space in this paper, we further selected four from these ten essays. We felt that the selected sample embodied some common themes from other students’ writings, meanwhile providing a good indication of the uniqueness of each

student's ICC learning journey. Therefore, we consider this sample to provide sufficient data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015) for our purpose of generating theory for comparison (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006), from which we can draw on to represent possible experiences and challenges that others may relate to when they find themselves in comparative situations.

In the next section, we present each case 'narratively' by integrating selected extracts from *in situ* journals and *post hoc* writings according to a somewhat chronological sequence, highlighting extracts specifically about conceptual abstractions of ICC. In our subsequent discussion, we connect particular aspects together and focus on emergent themes. Our approach to data analysis did not have any predetermined themes *per se*, rather, we continually read and reread each journal entry for emergent and changing (cf. Mazzei, 2014) themes until we could isolate them. This was somewhat akin to a constructivist grounded theory approach (cf. Charmaz, 2011) whereby we knew the general area themes would arise in but had no predetermined code to place upon the journal entries as such.

After each extract, we indicate its source through codes such as 'M-PH' or 'E-IS-W1', referring to the initial of the student's pseudonym, the *post hoc* or *in situ* status of their reflection, and the week number if relevant.

The cases

Eli

Eli started group work viewing otherness positively as 'stimulating' for intercultural learning. For example, regarding the 'criteria' she used to find her preferred group members, she wrote:

Some members I decided to stay with showed me a prejudice regarding countries of origin, namely the fact that all or the majority of the people coming from a particular country have a tendency of behaving in a certain way. It was interesting that in explaining that to me, they showed negative adjectives or judgements towards the 'others' while not very surprisingly they and 'their category' was in the positive side of the dichotomy... I found this very interesting, since I am very passionate about this kind of debate which recalls Hofstede, Trompenaars and the dimensional approach and I do not completely agree with it. So, I think it might be very stimulating to work with these classmates. (E-IS-W1)

In subsequent journals, Eli described 'difficult' group work episodes, a well-anticipated challenge given her intentional choice to work with cultural others. From these accounts, perspective-taking struck us as a salient theme, with one such example below. Eli consciously managed her communication behaviour by analysing how cultural others might perceive it differently:

I noticed... it was a little bit hard to make different approaches coexist and not clash... I think we realised how difficult writing a report all together is going to be, since everyone wants to work in his/her way ... I tried my hardest to find a way to convey my ideas without being too rude or 'dictatorial', because I know I might sound a little bit arrogant when I get overexcited and passionate about something, but I've learnt from previous experiences of teamwork that that does not help the work atmosphere at all, in particular if someone get offended. (E-IS-W2)

Also at this point, she felt 'not sure yet of how to delineate' ICC apart from merely highlighting attributes such as 'respect and open-minded attitude'.

Later, Eli wrote how she tried to empathise with cultural others (i.e. group members without the same background ICC knowledge) by relating their coursework struggles to her own similar experiences:

I know some groupmates have never done something similar, related to cultural diversity or in general about considering different things in different perspective and they are finding this very hard. However, I can understand that feeling,

because I felt the same in some business class in which theory concepts or very structured and exact procedures were required. I felt a connection in this way - trying to put myself in their shoes. These tasks are not easy... so I think only working as a team we can overcome them. (E-IS-W5)

At the end of their experiential learning experience, Eli commented on a 'partially (un)successful' attempt to become more ethno-relative:

Even though I thought I was considering other points of view, showing first signs of mindfulness and asking myself how to behave in that situation, I was evidently still stuck in my own beliefs and claims. (E-PH)

And yet, compared with early confusion about ICC, Eli could now articulate her thoughts with some certainty, resonant with ICC theories from class (but cross-referenced to evidence from her *in situ* reflections):

ICC is not a competence which can be acquired and then taken for granted, but rather a long-life and ongoing process ... ICC is not stable and therefore may be challenged by factors such as emotions, different contexts, other people's motivations and intentions. (E-PH)

Eli further interpreted her *in situ* reflections as presenting a 'progressive narrative', indicating 'ICC development' over the module:

Arguably, from entry 5 on, my ICC started to develop actively... From a holistic reading of my learning journal, an overall theme emerges, namely the depiction of an eye-opening experience as regards the difficulties in working in a cultural diverse environment and the fact that ICC development and the creation of a transactional culture tended not to be a natural process, but something which really required effort and willingness from all participants.

Reading the journal as an external observer, I can argue that the individual at the end of the experience is a different person more conscious and aware, showing higher levels of ICC than before, due to less certainties and fixed beliefs but more

openness to others' perspectives and willingness to reflect and see things from the others' point of view. (E-PH)

To Eli, her 'ICC development' was clearly facilitated by reflection:

The process induced by the learning journal, through which I was lead to reflect on the episode and ask myself questions, helped me partially reconcile, move on and consider others' perspectives ... the critical and reflective thinking helped the team's communication and resulted in the fact that I started to ask myself more questions, developing and increasing my initial curiosity, but gradually avoiding statements as truth claims, and through this avoidance thereby presenting a more complex, dynamic and flexible vision of the reality. (E-PH)

Rowan

In both *in situ* and *post hoc* reflections, Rowan wrestled with cultural stereotypes, for example from his first entry:

Before... this meeting, I had been really concerning about this group work going to be really difficult to accomplish. Because, I am the only group member from the other side of the world, which represents the eastern culture ... To be specific, I have a high tolerance to uncertainty of events and careless about details of works. On the contrary, especially for two students from [Country X] in our group, who are known as rigid to details, no tolerance to uncertainty. Thus, I am worried this first meeting is going to be a cultural shock for all of us. (R-IS-W3)

Whilst Rowan showed awareness of prior assumptions influenced by essentialist cultural theories, he also showed sensitivity to immediate, especially 'counter', evidence:

Surprisingly, these two students definitely break my stereotype of the rigidity of people's working style in [Country X] ... In terms of the ICC and awareness, I have started to obtain the viewpoints that there is always an exception towards national culture. (R-IS-W3)

This 'breaking' of stereotypes - arguably more a neo-essentialist position (Holliday, 2001) framed against a 'mainstream' / 'individual exception' discourse than a 'full' withdrawal from stereotypical thinking - was set to continue for Rowan. This is reflected in comments on both group and personal 'ICC development', e.g. tolerance and mutual respect of cultural difference:

Our group has been increasing our acceptance to... and competence to work with people from different cultures effectively step by step. For instance, though one student [from Country Y] has been absent from meetings two times or so, other group members did not complain at all. Instead, they gave comforting words and showed understanding to the situation. Thus, as time went to, our group has increase the ability to manage cultural diversity. (R-PH-W7)

However, as the group work progressed and 'difference' started to challenge Rowan's comfort zone, his inner dialogue turned sharply to a different direction. He 'fell back' on (earlier) national cultural stereotypes to explain his discomfort, consciously noting this as a reversal of his 'ICC development':

The two students [from Country X] hold their opinions towards some details of our writings such as the punctuation and the format... This is definitely a challenge to my patience as a person [from Country Z] who possesses less concerns about the details of our job, what we concerns more is the relationship between your partners ... As a result, this situation increased my stereotype of [Country X] are really rigid to details. Thus, I started confusing that whether the group work has increase my ICC or strengthen my stereotype of a specific culture. (R-PH-W8)

At the end of the module, Rowan reflected on his understanding of ICC by affirming the value of ICC-related attributes recommended in the literature:

Through the entire group work, I am aware... working in a group with people from various cultures could be difficult and challenging ... It seems we *should* deal with people from other cultures respectfully and objectively, we *should not* be chained by our stereotype of certain culture. Instead, we *should* communicate with people

in a non-essentialist view by considering the personality and ethnography of the person you are communicating with. (R-PH) (our italics)

Notably, Rowan acknowledged the influence on his ICC engagement of contextual factors and the interdependent task relationship. As he briefly commented early on:

The thing that cohere us together to work on [this project] is the common target we are going for, in this case, the writing of training plan. By achieving this, we learned to make compromise to others opinions so we can complete our task successfully. (R-IS-W3)

Regarding the event about two group members' 'rigidity' perceived as rooted in their national culture, Rowan recognised that 'whereas, this rigidity and patience are what we need for this time-consuming task', and therefore chose to 'calm down and listen to their opinions humbly'. Whilst this contextual consideration and compromised behaviour arguably provides an indication of Rowan's ICC, overall, he felt doubtful about any 'success' in his 'ICC development' and questioned the effectiveness of experiential learning (compared with instruction-based learning) to achieve this goal:

In terms of cultural competence, to be frank, it seems there is not that much competence and awareness I have obtained through the group work ... as I expected. Instead, the group work enlightened me with more perspectives to consider the people from other cultures. In my opinion, this entire module has the risk to increase our stereotype towards a nation culture as an essentialist...Instead, the class should spend more time to make more [lecture] slides on specific intercultural communication skills. (R-PH)

Interestingly, a critical friend who read Rowan's journals noted his emphasis on national cultural categories, suggesting that 'in future group work, the author may consider gender, age and other attributes of group member so that he can have a more objective and unbiased view in terms of cultural differences'. In response to this comment, Rowan felt those issues may have been important, yet, when explaining his

somewhat reluctant compromise, emphasised him being the only male (and from Country Z) in the group. Arguably, Rowan ultimately chose to maintain an essentialist position by constructing a power imbalance in the group through *a priori* national and gender categories, an ‘imbalance’ he considered hampered his ‘ICC development’.

Morgan

Morgan’s reflective essay revolved around themes of a ‘non-participating’ group member and using REL for ‘ICC development’. She summarised her early experience as ‘full of scepticism, resistance and criticism’:

Today, we started with trying to find a definition for ICC. In the end we came to the conclusion it is impossible to find an accurate one. But were also reminded we still have to find a personal definition for us. Which is kind of philosophical what I personally absolutely despise ... I like facts and... not... endless discussions about something, which can be or not be -- without no sense... I am seriously questioning the purpose of this class. The same goes for the [learning] journal I have no idea what [the lecturer] wants to hear and what I am supposed to do. (M-IS-W2).

Later, this questioning of the ‘vague’ objectives of the module continued:

I sometimes really don’t understand the objectives. Even though I am pretty sure [the lecturer] has an agenda behind I don’t get what exactly [the lecturer] is aiming for and honestly don’t think I’ll ever find out. (M-IS-W6)

Meanwhile, Morgan’s lengthy comments on a ‘non-participating’ group member moved from ‘neutral’ (‘it didn’t bother me that much’ in Week 4) to more ‘evaluative’ (‘found it very impolite’ in Week 6). This escalated into an emotionally intense scenario just before the final delivery of their group projects. After a period of absence, the ‘non-participating’ member returned, asking to contribute. Morgan wrote:

Well, honestly I got angry! However, I tried to calm myself down, even though I had the urge to tell this member what was going wrong. After taking a deep breath, calming myself down I explained the situation, in a polite but also direct way... I then explained that other group members were really annoyed... that this member... did not contribute to the group work so far.... This member could not give me any reason why behaved that way, and I realised soon it makes no sense to discuss that with him/her... I don't know but this situation made me feel bad for him/her. That's why I told this member if s/he contributes a lot to the training it will be fine for me that s/he did not help with the report. I also assured this member that I will state that in front of the group as s/he was a bit worried that people would complain about him/her to the teacher ... I realized... we all have to be extra patient... and... somehow always have to guide this member. Person 2 also told me that she feels like being his/her babysitter. (M-IS-W8)

Here, Morgan's words and responses could be interpreted as a strategic action with an underlying patronising attitude (through language such as 'have to be extra patient', 'always to have guide this member', 'babysitter') but, from the perspectives of Morgan and her critical friend, could also be related to 'empathy'.

As the group projects developed, Morgan's reflections showed changing perspectives on the 'module purpose':

The design of the training was actually really funny, everyone was really motivated and it was the first time we enjoyed having only vague guidelines. This freedom meant we were able to be creative. (M-IS-W9)

She also took action to 'contribute towards making future lectures better instead of only complaining about it', particularly about how reflection was used:

On the one hand they teach us to be ethically correct, they warn us to not expose personal/sensitive feelings/information of participants to the group. But by assigning us with writing/sharing our learning journal ethical correctness seems to be overrated. This really struck me! That's why I have decided to ask my teacher about ... it ... I actually wanted to hear an explanation for why [the lecturer] is making us do this even though it interferes totally in our privacy ... while [the

lecturer] said something I realised that my questions somehow came out very critical, almost offensive! I got the impression it made [the lecturer] somehow uncomfortable which I wasn't aiming for. That's why I decided to stop digging/discussing ... I believe me telling [the lecturer] that was still very good, as it made [them] overthink the assignment for this year and next. For this year, [they] at least removed the compulsory part of the critical friend ☺☺ (M-IS-W10)

Interestingly, whilst Morgan's *in situ* reflections were consistently situated in particular contexts of communication, in *post hoc* reflections, she drew on national cultural dimensions to explain the above interaction with her tutor, which occurred in the very last class, saying that 'according to Hofstede my country is a low power distance country, in which it is socially accepted to question people, regardless of their status'.

Morgan constructed her ICC trajectory as moving from 'observation', to 'acceptance' and towards 'constructive dialogue', ending with ICC 'partially acquired' due to contextual factors:

I have recognized/observed differences in perception or the way of working, but I was not able to adjust or adapt accordingly. From the feedback of my critical friend that might be because I was not willing to step out of my normal thinking zone and tried something new or vague ... Thinking about it that might be true I probably thought that my way somehow is the safe way as well as I was too afraid to try something new, which could be traced back to high uncertainty avoidance... I personally believe... I still have a long way to towards the adaption phase. Despite that I believe I might have developed a good starting point towards a higher level of intercultural sensitivity, as my empathy has developed to some extent... I am convinced... my tolerance level would have been higher if my grade was not depended on the group report. (M-PH)

Evelyn

Evelyn's case is the most emotionally-charged. As a critical friend wrote, 'the writer was devastated and left feeling helpless about what had happened to him or her.' In her reflections, Evelyn narrated how she felt marginalised throughout the group work by the

'rudeness' of two 'dominating' group members (referred to as 'A' and 'C' in the extracts below) and the 'quietness' of the other members. Her dramatic (even traumatic) experience began with initial happiness however:

I was excited part of because I did not know them that well, part of because we are from five different countries and all study in the UK now, which made our team very diversity in my opinion. (E-PH-W1)

However, Evelyn soon noticed the 'domination' of one member, to whom others responded with silent acquiescence:

[Group member] A ... presented us a draft structure of how to write the report without sent it to us before, just say we can have a look in this meeting...I was surprise and appreciate that A has already done so much because someone has to do it, but... I feel a little uncomfortable... I observed the others reaction, they were a little surprised too and saying how appreciate what A has done as well... Although I can understand A did this because A really wants us have a good mark but who does not? (E-PH-W3)

For Evelyn, the discomfort accumulated when she felt 'hurtfully' treated by Members A and C because of her national background and possibly something about her as an individual. She felt the group remained 'silent' despite such unjust behaviour:

I think C is really harsh on me, against whatever I said, even did not allow me to finish my sentence every time. I am really sad, I hope C did not do that for personally.

There was one particular thing C said is really really hurt my feeling, C said she is really sick of people from my country and teachers always used examples from my country. The others did not react to what C said and someone pick another topic. I cannot believe C said that in front of my face and the others ignored it.

Although I am not sure why some members in my group is particularly rude to me and the rest... just ignore it, but I have no choice but to think part of the reason is because I am not from European Union. (E-IS-W3)

Interestingly, Evelyn also reflected on why she was 'tolerant' rather than acting for change. She considered asking the lecturer if she could move group, but decided not to, partly concerned 'the lecturer will assume me as useless as well', 'other people in [this course] will say something behind me', and 'I do not want anyone get in trouble'.

As the group work proceeded, Evelyn continued to note Member C's consistently unfavourable responses to her ideas, writings or, even worse, to her as a person. This resulted in her mental withdrawal from the group work.

I was excited before this meeting because finally I wrote nearly two 1500 words for something, because member A was 'informing' that A, B and C has done so much wish someone else can do some work about x, and 'devoted' myself to do it.

But today, I am really really unhappy and upset. When they go through my stuff... C is judging and against everything I wrote but did not know the ideas are from A, and I noticed A is not happy with what C is saying, so kind of 'remind' the others that A gave me those main ideas to let me write and C was embarrassment and stop to judge and against. When I noticed that, I was upset more because I confirmed C is really does not like me and I don't know why.

To sum up, they did not use those shit I wrote. I tried to control myself and stop talking during this meeting although I also did not have too much talking chances before. (E-IS-W4)

The theme 'no respect to me at all in this group' was repeated in Evelyn's later journals. She hoped to 'get rid of this group as soon as possible' and decided to 'give up on thinking opinions and just let them do whatever they want'. This continued until a critical point when she voiced her opinion assertively. In their last meeting, members collectively reflected on the group work experience. Afterwards, Evelyn wrote:

I did not talk too much except saying really happy and thank you for everyone which is totally a lie... One breakthrough is the first time I said 'No' in front of A's face. A suggested we say some stereotype of others and how it has changed now I said I disagree and could not do that. And it was the first time that the others did not against me this time, maybe because the others also feel it really hurts others feelings to do this in front of people's face directly. (E-IS-W7)

Evelyn attributed this change, at least partly, to the reflective element of this learning experience.

After this teamwork finished, I became more relax and calm down and have time to think about why it came to this way. Also from the process of reviewing learning journal and writing this essay, I had a new cognition and understanding of myself, which something never occurred to my mind before. That is, I realized I am used to being 'alienated' in a group, class or community and part of me do not want to change it even felt safe about it. But this leads to a serious situation which out of control and kind of damage both my emotion and social life...

But the whole review, memory and critical friends' feedback made me think, and decided to change. I told myself I will try braver to show my unwillingness next time and I did it. As presented in the journal, I did not change my schedule to satisfy them anymore and at last. (E-PH)

Evelyn summarised the group's management of cultural diversity as an 'unfortunate failure' despite the successful delivery of the group project (regarding its 'good' grade). The group work experience gradually led her to lose 'confidence' and the ability to 'contribute more in academic work', and even 'reject social life partly (because I was) afraid I will be treated "alienated" as I was in the teamwork again'. She considered her ICC to 'even retrograde' from feeling marginalised:

[The literature suggests that] being in the vicinity of another culture but failing to engage with it does little to increase intercultural skill ... The point is I felt I was not belonging to that group not mention to 'engage'. (E-PH)

Nevertheless, Evelyn presented several other thoughtful aspects of her ICC, beginning with a non-essentialist note on her approach to cultural others:

After a whole trimester learning, I have already get the 'stereotyping' concept out of my mind, the more I learned and experience, the more I judge a person by his or her personality instead of national cultures.

I refuse to give stereotyping of the others because whether they believe it or not I did not have stereotyping of them at first and until the end. I can understand different people has different personalities and we cannot judge which personality is better because we are equal and such diversity in personality make a more interesting world. And I like people with unique personality even he or she is being judge by majority. (E-PH)

Then, citing academic literature in ICC and cultural diversity management, Evelyn rationalised the group's acquiescence to the unjust treatment she received as an intentional strategy of 'reinforcing homogeneity' to maintain 'the harmony not only (of) our little team but also the whole ... class'. She further identified a positive outcome of her ICC learning journey by locating it in broader considerations of personal growth:

(Now) I realized I have been lucky before to worked with nice people but this experience of such horrible work really should come much earlier to me, then I will grow up earlier and know what to do, how to be more productive and fulfil my responsibility in an intercultural teamwork context. In this point, my ICC did improve. (E-PH)

In summary, Evelyn commented that, 'although the teamwork did not went through well' and 'I do not think my ICC developed too much through this group work process', 'I think I am still open-minded, would like to know new person and respect the others and their personalities as before' and 'discover a new me'.

Discussion and conclusion

The above cases illustrate a kaleidoscope of highly personal learning experiences, which present some thought-provoking complexities about personal 'ICC development' and using REL for this purpose. Whilst students all constructed their experiences as involving changes, the changes do not appear indicative of teleological 'ICC development'. Indeed, these students concluded the end results of their experiential learning experiences as 'partially successful' / 'limited' 'ICC development' or even 'reinforced stereotypes'. These may well be interpreted as a 'lack' of 'ICC development' if evaluated against 'success' criteria, e.g. represented by the 'acquisition' of conventionally-defined ICC attributes. However, we contend that these comments, conveying a note of disappointment, may actually indicate genuine desires to overcome ethnocentrism, enhance personal flexibility regarding multiple frames of reference, and engage with cultural others in equal dialogue, an educated desire not taught from textbooks but developed through praxis.

Moreover, students' nuanced reflexive analysis revealed conscious recognition of areas they indeed considered promising, such as more cautious stances towards certainty, fixity and absolute truth claims, informed critique of the danger of cultural stereotyping (whilst wrestling with it), enhanced readiness to initiate change and fight against perceived injustice, and more realistic perspectives on intercultural communication complexities such as contextual contingencies, external pressure, and power imbalance. Some also recognised intercultural learning as contributing to personal growth and expressed willingness to continue the process beyond academic studies.

Resonant with the argument forwarded by critical ICC theorists who advocate moving away from functionalist and de-politicised approaches to ICC theorisation and

teaching (see the literature review), we call for a critical review of the linearity and decontextualised ‘success’ orientation underlying popular ICC conceptualisations, based on the evidence illustrated in our case studies.

In their reflections, our students celebrated ‘curiosity’, ‘respect’, ‘open-mindedness’, and ‘willingness/ability to adapt/dialogue’ as desirable goals to strive towards. Nonetheless, further to their direct comments on the practical difficulty of ‘fully’ achieving these attributes, their reflections suggest that actual practices and motives associated with these concepts can be far more complex than the meanings intended in them as noble human virtues. For example, Rowan ‘tolerated’ national cultural difference he perceived in working styles as a reluctant compromise to task-focused goals. Morgan’s ‘empathy’ towards a non-contributing group member was underpinned by a patronising tone (cf. tolerance as ‘a form of charity’ in MacDonald & O’Regan, 2013, p.1015). While Morgan ‘tolerated’ a learning approach she considered ‘unethical’ with great discomfort, Evelyn painfully ‘tolerated’ perceived ‘alienation’ due to concerns of face. This ‘tolerance’ even became the driving force for later decisions to act otherwise for personal dignity or ‘constructive dialogue’. Notably, this only occurred when they felt ‘safe’ to do so (e.g. after completing the group projects or module) and, partly due to this timing, did not evidently contribute to any ‘mutually respectful’ dialogue with cultural others. We argue such evidence, though collected from micro-level contexts, generates insights for larger considerations concerning the importance of reviewing much vaunted ICC attributes. Does the above represent ‘inadequate’ types of empathy, tolerance, and dialogue, which need to be ‘purified’ or ‘improved’? Or conversely, does it reflect complex actualities that arguably always contextualise the manifestation of those ICC attributes? If so, and where attribute-oriented approaches to ICC are preferred, should learning objectives be renewed with

alternative concepts to better address these complexities (e.g. Bloom's concept of 'rational compassion' against the 'fetishisation of empathy', 2016; Ferri's concept of 'deferred understanding' against 'universal tolerance', 2016)?

Our cases presented differing views on the links between reflection and 'ICC development'. Some students considered reflection useful. With reference to their *in situ* reflections, they explained how reflection enabled them to analyse 'problematic' scenarios by tuning into themselves, prompting them to act differently. Others were less convinced, culminating in Morgan's extreme discomfort and questioning of the ethical aspect of REL. This suggests reflection may not be readily accepted by all learners, particularly those expecting knowledge with 'certainty' or not wishing their inner thoughts openly challenged by external perspectives. Thus, reflection undoubtedly needs careful administration with individual learners pedagogically. Educators must be especially watchful for students potentially suffering negative emotions if revisiting mentally 'damaging' experiences. However, we equally feel that without these reflective exercises, the complex realities of our students' ICC learning journeys – arguably naturally occurring through any type of group work regardless of *ad hoc* course assignments - would have remained unknown to us; relying on traditional pedagogical methods (e.g. intellectual theorising and debating, reflections on 'neutral' encounters) would have produced limited effect in facilitating students' deep intercultural engagement. Also, regarding our earlier point about reflection being an integral component of ICC, we wonder whether some students' persistent 'resistance' to REL indicates a 'resistance' to 'ICC development' at large and, if so, whether intercultural education should tackle this 'resistance' as an explicit learning objective. Specifically, is it intercultural educators' responsibility to 'enforce' 'ICC development' when students do not feel ready? If so, what are the ethical implications pedagogy-

wise? If not, when will students be ready for this challenge, how can we know, or rather, will this happen at all without educational intervention?

Finally, although space does not permit us to go into detail, we highlight that while our study focuses on the individual, the data also provide many pointers for future research on the interactional dynamics of intercultural communication, such as intersubjective constructions of '(equal) contribution' in task-dependent relationships and the difficulty to achieve meaningful 'dialogue' (cf. Bakhtin, 1981; Buber, 1947).

Final remarks and further thoughts for the field

In our study, the data were writings students produced for assessment, which could be biased towards their grade. Arguably, students were writing what they felt tutors wanted, and often commented specifically on this. Equally, though, we argue that students felt good grades represented good 'ICC development', and thus their comments and thoughts were anchored to their perceptions of ideal ICC based on theories introduced in the module. Further, there were also potentially favourable biases for examining ICC. The fact that students work was assessed arguably represents the creating of similar high-pressure contexts intercultural communication may often occur in, such as when differences perceived as 'hurdles' must be overcome to reach strategic consensus.

We would like to conclude with a note on the relationship between essentialism and non-essentialism, a salient theme emerging from our data with important links to ICC. Sometimes, our students used national cultural categories to construct their reflections, but reasons varied. Rowan found himself 'falling back' on national cultural stereotypes, and constructed a 'power imbalance' based on nationality and gender distributions in his group. These seemed to work as a quick placebo when he felt his personal patience level was severely challenged by cultural others' meticulous working

style but, for reasons not detailed in his reflections, did not wish to negotiate this difference. Morgan referred to the ‘power distance’ index of her country (Hofstede, 2001) to rationalise her ‘rude’ questioning towards the tutor. Evelyn, after failing to locate alternative reasons, explained her perceived exclusion from her group through geopolitically-defined identities. We see these students, educated thoroughly about the danger of essentialism through intellectual studies, did *not* choose to avoid national cultural concepts when trying to understand certain aspects of their experiences. Nevertheless, what we feel particularly significant is that we do *not* see these students treating such concepts as ‘simple’, nor relying on them in the initial stages of their ‘ICC development’ as a ‘starting point’. Rather, we see students continually reflecting on such concepts throughout their experiential learning, simultaneously believing non-essentialist approaches should be the core of ‘developing ICC’. Thus, their ability to reflect on complex intercultural experiences from a non-essentialist perspective, to some extent, was afforded by a reflective dialectic between non-essentialism and essentialism.

We thus contend that essentialist conceptualisations of culture were not negative at all levels (contra Holliday, 1999). Our students’ learning journeys show essentialism not necessarily as an initial ‘starting point’ for individuals on a traditional received teleological road towards enlightened non-essentialism. We suggest that rather than being completely rejected, such essentialist conceptualisations be acknowledged in intercultural education, not because of their structuralist explanatory potential that has been argued by many to be simplistic (e.g. McSweeney, 2002), but rather, because they are conceptualisations people will inevitably and often ineluctably be drawn towards (cf. Dervin, 2016), and can be purposeful reflectors providing a complex and ever-present alter-ego for learners, which we believe fundamentally important for intercultural learning. In an almost symbiotic complementarity, essentialism and non-

essentialism may exist *through* each other, and, we argue, would not exist alone *without* their corresponding counterparts. Despite representing a politically correct racism (McSweeney, 2013), ‘otherisation’ and ‘culturism’ (Holliday, 1999), arguments which we stress we agree with entirely, essentialism existed and played a role throughout these students’ ‘ICC development’. We would postulate that this role will continue for our students in the real world, and is perhaps representative of an inevitable facet of human nature to seek to judge on first impressions. To conclude, we argue that in intercultural education, rather than completely dismiss essentialist approaches as initial simplistic ones to move forward from, we could better tap their worth by acknowledging their ever-present role in the complex development of non-teleologically-based ICC.

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