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Intercultural education in everyday practice

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Abstract

While there is substantive work in intercultural education, especially that which proposes intellectual or conceptual roadmaps for pedagogic interculturalism and, more specifically for the classroom, there is a need to surface the complexity of everyday intercultural classroom practices. This article reflects on some Singapore students' responses to materials designed to help them engage critically with intercultural issues. These responses can be categorized into three types of trajectory: *reifying*, *critical* and *conflicted*. Reifying practices basically mean that students essentialize individuals, communities and countries despite (and perhaps because of) the intercultural approach to the teaching of communication. Critical trajectories, on the other hand, showcase students' ability to identify stereotypes and provide much more nuanced characterizations of individuals and countries. Conflicted trajectories, however, seem to be the most dominant classroom practice: these are attempts of students to be critical but, in practice, their criticality is enmeshed in reifying tendencies. In other words, students' engagement with interculturalism is conflicted: 'criticality' as it is envisioned is always incomplete on the ground. Thus, we need micro-lenses in interculturalism and intercultural education to help us critically reflect on and surface essentialisms, tensions and struggles in everyday classroom practice.

Keywords: intercultural education, classroom, critical, Singapore

INTRODUCTION

"From global terrorism to local community conflicts", Bleiker and Brigg (2011) argue, "cultural difference is widely invoked in conflicts that beset today's world" (p. 1). One way to address this 'problem' of cultural difference is through interculturalism, a configuration of beliefs and practices which promote respect for and acceptance of diversity in today's societies. For example, some governments around the world have responded to problems concerning migration, ethnic nationalism, minority rights, and environmental preservation through the promulgation of laws that recognize the existence of minority groups in society and their contributions to national development. Such need for recognition often translates to the opening up of national education curricula to a wider range of voices and stories in society hoping that a more inclusive education will result in populations which are tolerant towards all groups of people, both dominant and underserved. In this sense, pedagogic interculturalism in the 21st century,

is best envisioned as applied social science promoting the dialogue between cultures and civilizations, as well as supporting the development of democratic multicultural societies. (Bleszynska 2008, p. 542)

In more specific sense, pedagogic interculturalism or more commonly referred to as 'intercultural education':

strives to eliminate prejudice and racism by creating an awareness of the diversity and relative nature of viewpoints and thus a rejection of absolute ethnocentrism; assists people in acquiring the skills needed to interact more effectively with people different from themselves; and demonstrates that despite the differences that seem to separate people, many similarities do, in fact, exist across groups. (Cushner, 2009, p. 2.)

However, it largely remains to be seen how interculturalism is applied, apprehended, or appropriated in real-life contexts. Thus, the purpose of this article is to reflect on interculturalism as it comes alive in the classroom by providing examples of how various responses to a text offer 'intercultural' stances which otherwise would not have been made visible in more common conceptual studies in intercultural education. Through these reflections, I will raise compelling questions about how the practice of intercultural education is far more complex and nuanced than what is envisaged in the literature.

There is substantive work in intercultural education, especially those which propose intellectual or conceptual roadmaps for interculturalism (Batelaan, 2000; Bharucka, 1999; Bleszynska, 2008; Coulby, 2006; DeWitt, 2003; Gundara, 2000; Oikonomidoy, 2011; Wilson & Wilson, 2001; Zembylas, 2011), describe its shape and politics as it gets incorporated into national curricula (e.g. Aleksan & Sahlberg, 2010; Chircu & Negreanu, 2010; Horst & Pihl, 2010; Pratas, 2010), and provide more practical roadmaps for the classroom (Devran, 2010; Ernalsteen, 2002; Le Roux, 2001; Mushi, 2004; Sharan, 2010), including for teacher education (Cushner, 2009) and for designing intercultural education and training programs (Stephan & Stephan, 2013). However, there is a need to surface the complexity of classroom responses where intercultural agendas are introduced to gain a better understanding of interculturalism as it is taught and learned in day-to-day classroom work. Teachers too are designers of intercultural relations, for example through the materials that they design in their classes (Young & Chi, 2013, p. 134), yet agenda-setting intercultural pedagogies and policies "are seldom juxtaposed to their actual implementation in the classroom setting" (Valdiviezo, 2010, p. 29). Work in this line of inquiry is sporadic but hugely important (see also Halualani, 2011; Harbon & Browett, 2006; Moloney, 2009).

Moreover, despite variation, intercultural experiences may produce paradoxical outcomes. In fact, even some classrooms that attempt to question culture as static also fall into the trap of essentializing or homogenizing culture. In other words, these critical attempts do not materialize in ways and shapes as envisaged theoretically (Mendoza, 2008; Bleszynska, 2008; Borrelli, 1991; Dasli, 2011; Gorski, 2008; Lund, 2003). There is thus a need to look at classroom practice as a locus of conflict, negotiation and transformation of even the most earnest and critical pedagogies.

WHAT IS CRITICALITY IN THE INTERCULTURAL CLASSROOM?

Problematizing 'culture'

Criticality is, to be sure, a slippery concept. However, in this article criticality is viewed as a range of perspectives that attempt to question the continuing stereotyping and reification of culture in intercultural classrooms and other social settings. In its most basic form, a critical perspective assumes that culture is a dynamic, fluid and complex entity, as opposed to a static view of it when we stereotype specific groups of people (Nakayama & Halualani, 2010). One consequence would be that culture is essentially cultures – plural – with national culture as only one of its many dimensions. Gender, class, sub-national ethnicities, inter-generational relations and many others all come into play in intercultural interactions. Even those who appear to privilege ‘national’ culture are mindful of this privileging: “Nations and cultures are sometimes confused and very often confounded in theory and research” (Levine, Park, & Kim, 2007, p. 208). Even countries, Japan, Korea and China for example, which have been traditionally assumed to be relatively homogeneous are increasingly seen as intra-nationally diverse in many aspects of life, including their communication styles (Yoshida, Yashiro, & Suzuki, 2013; Park, 2012). A postmodern critique goes even further: it locates the locus of intercultural interactions and engagements in the uniqueness of individuals’ cultural identity (Jameson, 2007; Nair-Venugopal, 2008).

Politicizing ‘culture’

Moreover, criticality also involves an avowedly explicit political position, for example that culture is a nexus of unequal power relations between or among speakers who, because of the cultures they embody and which constitute them, struggle over power and dominance (Bryan, 2010; Dasli, 2011; Mendoza, 2008; Rowe, 2010; Wilson & Wilson, 2001). Another example of an explicitly political position concerns the view that cultural interactions historically have in fact been “much more commonly characterized by conquest, slave trades, imperialism and genocide” (Coulby, 2006, p. 247), so the classroom must also account for such troubling interactions. There is, thus, no singular view of criticality in intercultural classrooms. Nevertheless, the common ground among the critical approaches seems to be this: a critical intercultural classroom must *at least* work against stereotyping and reifying culture.

The dominance of cultural essentialism

This is because essentialist deployments of culture continue to be dominant both in the theory and practice of intercultural communication. The pioneering work of Hofstede (1980, 1991) has been dismantled from different theoretical fronts, for example through its use of a flawed methodology (McSweeney, 2002), its stubborn focus on the nation as the essence of culture (Jameson, 2007), and its lack of focus on culture as constituted by relations of power among speakers and interlocutors (Nakayama & Halualani, 2010). However, while essentializing theories of culture (see also the works of Hall, 1977; 1966; Trompenaars, 1993) are problematic, they remain “fixtures” (Cardon, 2008, p. 399) in cross-cultural academic work. Examples of such fixtures are the so-called differences between direct and indirect communication styles in Western and non-Western cultures, as well as essentialized differences between Western and Asian ways of doing business.

A far broader and more nuanced view of culture in communication and education will sensitize teachers into critical work in any kind of classroom activity. For example, Hulualani (2011) uses familiar strategies in intercultural classrooms such as simulations, journaling,

case scenarios and case studies, but deploys them to probe into “the ways in which power plays out in cultures and intercultural communication encounters and contexts” (pp. 50–51).

THE CONTEXT

The course

This article draws on my experience teaching and designing materials for the course *Business Communication*, a second-year level compulsory undergraduate course in the School of Business of the National University of Singapore. The students are Singaporean students, with one or two international students in a tutorial group of 18-20. It is a compulsory 48-hour course which means that all undergraduate students of the school, regardless of major or specialization, are required to take it. As Coordinator of the course, the materials I designed for the course are used in all tutorial groups (numbering between 15 and 22 groups per semester).

The cultural dimensions of communication are introduced in the first few meetings of each semester and frame the rest of the work in the course, including report writing, letter writing and oral presentations, in order to help explain why speakers write and speak in the manner that they do. The teaching of business communication continues to be Anglo-centric; that is, it is viewed hugely from the lens of ‘White Western’ values and practices (Cardon, 2008; Devoss, Jasken, & Hayden, 2002). Thus, by framing the course in intercultural communication, it is hoped that the teaching becomes more accepting of different cultural norms in communication and less vulnerable to stereotyping and ethnocentrism.

The framework of the course

The ‘intercultural’ framework that underpins the teaching and design of these materials has undergone transformations through the instigations of recent academic and institutional changes. For example, the course has been re-codified by the business school as a ‘leadership’ core module among business students, and the broad leadership ideal that must be taught is ‘responsible’, ‘ethical’ and ‘caring’ leadership that is ‘global’ and ‘Asian’ at the same time. Similarly, this reconceptualization of the course is a response to recent politico-academic climate where connections are made between economic theories and practices in the classroom and the role of businessmen and economists in the recent troubles in the global economy (Podolny, 2009). Moreover, the field of business communication has also engaged in deep self-reflections, resulting in the redesign of curricula that give more attention to pedagogies based on ethical and cultural considerations. In her speech to the Association of Business Communication, Jameson (2009) relates the teaching of business communication to the larger political economy of globalization by arguing that the field of business communication is partly responsible for recent economic and business troubles in the world.

Pulled together, all this institutional and academic re-visioning of educational agenda inform the recent initiatives in the redesign of intercultural materials in the business communication course mentioned earlier. It is for this reason that I focused on finding out the effectiveness of these materials as they are taught in my classroom and taken up by the students. In the process of doing so, several questions and issues arose concerning the

daily operationalization of interculturalism in the classroom, including its critical dimensions, which require further reflection. As mentioned at the start of this article, based on my reflective analysis of pedagogical experiences in a higher education context, I offer insights regarding the practice or operationalization of interculturalism in the classroom, including its critical dimensions, showing how it could be far more complex and conflicted than what is envisaged in the literature (Halualani, 2011; Radstake & Leeman, 2010).

The 'intercultural' material

The article critically reflects on two semesters of materials design (2009-2010) done for the course based on student scripts, my own classroom notes, and observations and reconstructions of short dialogues and interactions during classroom discussions and tutors' meetings – all of which were initially collected as potential sources for an exercise in 'reflective teaching' (see Tupas, 2009). Specifically, the article describes and interrogates students' engagement with one classroom material, an excerpt of a meeting among three executives of a company. What is in question is the prompt that describes each of the meeting participants and which, thus, will have an impact on how the excerpt is understood. The instruction is for the students to analyse the text from an intercultural perspective, looking at patterns in communication among the participants and relate them, if possible or necessary, to the participants' cultural orientations or predispositions.

INTERCULTURALISM AT THE CHALKFACE: PEDAGOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Thus, in this section I describe some practices and transformations of interculturalism as I observed them in a classroom in Singapore, and argue that interculturalism as it is practised is conflicted and unpredictable, even in its critical manifestations. The varied reception at the chalkface affirms the complex nature of the classroom owing to the fact that teachers and students bring along with them differing ideologies and discourses which largely define how they respond to specific classroom texts and activities.

In the section that follows, I categorize my observations of student responses to an 'intercultural' prompt (see Text A below) into three kinds of trajectories: *reifying*, *critical* and *conflicted*. Reifying practices basically mean that students essentialize individuals, communities and countries despite (and perhaps because of) the intercultural approach to the teaching of communication. Critical trajectories, on the other hand, showcase some students' critical approach to culture; they are able to identify stereotypes and provide much more nuanced characterizations of individuals and countries. Conflicted trajectories, however, seem to be the most dominant classroom practice: these are attempts of students to be critical but, in practice, their criticality is enmeshed in reifying tendencies. In other words, if framed within critical intercultural pedagogy, students in general do not become 'critical'. Their engagement with interculturalism is conflicted: among the Singaporean students at least, 'criticality' as it is envisioned is always incomplete on the ground.

Text A: The 'intercultural' prompt (original)

Revenue growth vs. corporate image management

In an excerpt of a meeting below, three top executives of *Finance Asia*TM discuss how best to proceed with revenue growth strategies. **Konrad Paracuelles**, who has studied and worked in the Philippines, is the Assistant Director for research. **Faiza**, trained as a marketing strategist from Malaysia, is the Head of the company's corporate image management division. American **Laura Smith** is the Managing Director of the entire company and is the most senior of the three.

Reifying trajectories

Stereotyping as dominant intercultural practice

The prompt draws on a dominant understanding of interculturalism where speakers from different cultures, but largely national cultures, come together to create an intercultural situation. Some students, thus, would view Konrad and Faiza — because they are Filipino and Malaysian — as 'less direct' than Laura who is from the United States. In other words, the students could be guilty of cultural essentialism where nuances of culture are ignored, including the participants' individuality.

It may be argued that the design of the prompt itself already positions the student to read the meeting excerpt in a particular essentializing way. The prompt's characterization of participants ignores the complexity of the globalized corporate world because it "pushes us in the direction of a 'dictatorship' of the cultural by reducing the individual to his/her cultural membership" (Abdallah-Preteuille, 2006, p. 476). However, one can actually also probe deeper into the prompt and find important contextual and cultural clues about the participants (for example, their variegated specialist work and Laura's seniority which could have shaped the patterns of interaction between them as well). Here, important (other) clues are ignored because the students engage in the endemic "concretization of nations through daily reification" (Ono, 2010, p. 88) because their everyday framework pushes them to assume the existence of reified cultural traits, behaviours and values associated with particular national groups. Such framework or cultural 'knowledge', in turn, drives their understanding of the prompt.

Some students, in other words, think, speak and write within the *still* dominant functionalist or postpositivist paradigm of thinking about culture. In this paradigm,

...culture is often viewed as a variable, defined *a priori* by group membership, many times on a national level, and includes an emphasis on the stable and orderly characteristics of culture, and the relationship between culture and communication is usually conceptualized as causal and deterministic (Martin & Nakayama, 2010, p. 60).

Therefore, a postpositive intercultural instruction and analysis essentially requires at least two analytical steps. First, accumulate cultural 'facts' or knowledge about

nations and their people. And second, use this knowledge to explain patterns of intercultural communication between people. This goes without saying that before communication takes place, it is assumed that its shape is largely pre-determined by who the participants are going to be, especially which cultural groups they belong to. The analysis becomes a practice of “trying to understand people by reproducing what we already know about them” (Ono, 2010, p. 93). In a social cognitive sense, students internalize stereotypes in the form of cognitive schemas which simplify social reality (Augoutinos & Walker, 1998), and which are then reproduced discursively such as by/in the text in question (van Dijk, 1990).

Critical trajectories

I have observed three main critical stances but, as will be explained later in the article, these stances are not typical responses in my classroom. Nevertheless, they are presented here because they do occur in the classroom – albeit minimally – and to juxtapose them later against the more typical instantiations of criticality being transformed in various ways in the classroom.

Interrogating stereotypes as emerging criticality

One critical stance concerns questioning the design of the material itself because it promotes stereotyping. One student, for example, highlighted the fact that while the lectures in the course emphasized the need to avoid stereotyping national cultures, his group thought that the exercise (through the prompt) forced them to stereotype too. The student explained that the characterization of individuals in the prompt neatly corresponded with particular cultural ways of speaking, thus giving students very little space to interrogate the characters.

In other words, the group was clearly aware of the need to avoid stereotyping, but was framed to do so because of the way the text was designed. What is, of course, particularly different in this case is the possibility that the group was developing self-reflexivity regarding its own assumptions and values stirred up in part by the lecture on stereotyping; that is, the group was beginning to exhibit an ability to question its own assumptions and values regarding stereotyping. The students have shown capability in exercising criticality through problematic texts, surfacing nuances beyond reified, essentialist knowledge, thus demonstrating “an evolving capacity to engage self-reflexively” (Chan & Law, 2013, p. 214) with the complex nature of communication, culture and knowledge production.

Recuperating the right to be similar

During the second semester, the prompt was revised based on observations and feedback during the earlier semester. The three meeting participants are now seemingly more culturally complex, at least in terms of how they are characterized, in order to address both the issue of stereotyping and the reality of workplaces becoming more multicultural due to globalization. Moreover, other cultural

dimensions are surfaced more clearly in the revised prompt, like Laura's extensive experience in 'several Asian countries'.

Text A: An 'intercultural' prompt (revised)

Revenue growth vs. corporate image management

In an excerpt of a meeting below, three top executives of *Finance Asia*TM discuss how best to proceed with revenue growth strategies. Konrad Paracuelles, who has **studied and worked in the Philippines, Singapore and Germany**, is the Assistant Director for research. Faiza, trained as a **strategist in multinational companies based in Malaysia and the United States**, is the Head of the company's corporate image management division. Laura Smith is the Managing Director of the entire company and is the most senior of the three. She has **almost two decades of banking experience in several Asian countries**.

Another critical stance from students builds on the assumption that the three characters (Konrad, Faiza, and Laura) are more similar in their patterns of talk than different. All three are described as relatively powerful; while Konrad and Faiza are sometimes silent, it is because they probably need time to think. Interruptions between them come from friendly exchanges, and not because one is more culturally 'direct' than others. Some students, therefore, describe how a 'new' culture of openness and collaboration emerges between them.

This is a radical departure from the earlier reifying stance that focuses on how talk makes the three characters different from each other. Such reifying stance, invoking a dominant epistemological assumption in intercultural communication studies, focuses on what makes the three characters different largely based on differences between national cultures. The purpose essentially is to surface the differences with the view of respecting 'diversity' and equality among cultures of the world. The specific critical stance being described here, however, begins by exploring commonalities between the three participants in the company without grounding them in the essentialist notion of culture as 'national'. This view of culture opens up to an identity-based lens (Jameson, 2007) which begins to de-privilege or de-center the nation in the configuration of cultures. Thus, while reifying stances privilege and essentialize difference (Abdallah-Preteille, 2006), some critical stances explore an alternative open-ended commonality that emerges *in the moment* of intercultural contact.

Transforming culture at the moment of speaking

Similarly, a nuanced appraisal of the prompt could also be gleaned through the students' understanding of silence introduced in the preceding section. While the three participants exert relatively the same amount of power, Konrad and Faiza are sometimes silent, but also supposedly interrupt Laura in other parts. Thus again, the silence of the two participants is not haphazardly explained through their 'national cultures', but the interplay of different elements present in the interaction. The students do not claim that Konrad hesitates because he comes from an 'indirect'

national culture; instead, the students argue that he and Faiza sometimes stop talking because they need to think. Thus, unlike the reifying stance which assumes a priori existence of cultural differences which consequently can explain what is yet to happen, this particular critical stance provides an explanation of the cultural dynamics between the participants as it emerges from the interaction. In this sense, culture is created and transformed at the moment of speaking, leading to the point that “what we ‘know’ is never fixed and stable” (Martin & Nakayama, 2010, p. 66).

Conflicted trajectories

As mentioned, the range of critical stances above are *not* typical responses even after the prompt was revised to account for more nuances in the meeting excerpt. Criticality, in other words, is not a transparent and straightforward phenomenon which can easily be established. What are more common are responses which combine criticality with other intercultural trajectories. What emerges is not criticality as envisioned as an ideal pedagogical approach or framework, but one that is deeply embedded in the everyday politics of interculturalism which shapes students’ (and tutors’) operationalization or application of criticality in the classroom.

For example, students would describe the meeting as “low-context”, that is, talk is generally clear and frank and does not rely much on culturally-embedded meaning-making. The culture in the meeting was described as plural; the participants draw on a wide range of work and life trajectories, thus their behaviours are generally unpredictable from the point-of-view of nation-based interculturalism. In the same description, however, Laura was also described as American for being direct, even if sometimes she pauses and listens to others. Konrad and Faiza too were direct, thus defying their so-called Asian ways of communicating, even if there were also moments of hesitation.

On the one hand, the students’ appraisal of the text displays a nuanced and critical understanding of interculturalism. For example, ‘low-context’ is deployed not in relation to national cultures, but in relation to the specific context of the meeting itself. It is clear to the student that the meeting is complex because it is ‘plural’. Each participant is not reduced to one national culture (e.g. Filipino, Singaporean, American), thus intercultural essentialism is circumvented.

On the other hand, it also appears that the students continue to latch on to what was earlier referred to in the article as the *still* dominant functionalist or postpositivist paradigm of thinking about culture. For example, the meeting is ‘plural’ because sometimes Laura acts out her being American through ‘direct’ speech, while sometimes she just listens indirectly referring to Laura’s vast years of experience in Asia. Similarly, the meeting is ‘plural’ because there are times when Konrad and Faiza defy their Asian communicative traditions by being direct. In other words, the students continue to reify culture while they attempt to dismantle such reification.

As mentioned earlier, this has been the much more typical nature of criticality in the classroom, where it does not occur in isolation but is deeply entangled with other seemingly less critical understandings of intercultural interaction. It surfaces the intricacies of interculturalism as it is practised in the classroom, thus raising questions about how

intercultural experiences in the classroom produce paradoxical outcomes. To a large extent, this is unavoidable as the classroom is, to start with, a socially and ideologically complex setting where both teachers and students bring along with them their own essentialisms especially in relation to national and sub-national ethnic stereotypes. The practice of essentializing has been found to have profound and powerful explanatory power in human reasoning and, therefore, appears very early in human development (Gelman & Taylor, 2000). This tendency merges with the ubiquitousness of nation-states or “cultural containers” (Taylor, 1994, p. 156) which make them easy targets for cultural boundary-making. These are not whimsical suppositions; in the words of Coulby (2006), “The unit of analysis of intercultural education rarely strays across the borders of states” (p. 248). Thus, the practice of intercultural education, even in its critical dimension, is indeed fraught with contradictions.

Conclusion

Through my own personal reflections, this article has described a range of ideological stances in a classroom in Singapore framed within the lenses of interculturalism. From downright stereotyping as a deeply ingrained intercultural practice, we also see more critical dimensions of interculturalism where students demonstrate self-reflexivity towards their own cultural assumptions and an understanding of the highly nuanced nature of culture. Surely the role of materials design cannot be ignored: we see above the potential of materials to ‘frame’ students’ analysis of texts. However, this can only go so far. The article has also shown the possibility that, even in the context of an intercultural classroom that is envisaged to be critical in its take on cultures, what could emerge are complex and conflicted stances on intercultural education.

In short, an intercultural approach to education (no matter how this approach is defined in more specific ways) may not be intercultural in the way we think it to be. Practices of stereotyping and essentialism exist, and in cases where critical ideas are introduced, criticality is deeply enmeshed in ideological struggles.

“To prepare the learner for the outside complex world”, according to Mushi (2004), “teachers must consider cultural diversity (among other dimensions of diversity) in the process of guiding the creation, development, experiencing and interpretation of knowledge and skills” (p. 180). What this article has shown, however, is that teaching and learning about cultural diversity (and even helping learners critically engage diversity and its deceptively attenuating discourses) do not necessarily lead to the teaching and learning of cultural diversity the way it is envisioned. Consequently, we need micro-lenses in interculturalism and intercultural education to help us textualize essentialisms, tensions and struggles in everyday classroom practice. As we make these problems and contradictions more visible, we also sharpen the trajectories of pedagogic interculturalism. While it remains an ‘aspiration’ (Coulby, 2006, p. 247); in practice it is a relentless struggle over many undercutting visions.

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