Learning to become an intercultural practitioner:

The case of lifelong learning intensive programme Interdisciplinary Course

of Intercultural Competences

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Abstract: This paper dates back to 2009 (it was first presented at the CRLL Conference at Stirling University) and deals with the advances in lifelong learning introduced by an ERASMUS LLP—IP named Interdisciplinary Course of Intercultural Competences (ICIC). The programme, that involves academic and non-academic institutions concerned with higher education of six different European countries, worked out an intensive international learning pathway aimed at developing intercultural competences in three professional fields: education, social work and health care. The paper focuses on the programme's innovative combination of formal and informal learning as a strategic lever to: (1) enhance a holistic concept of "competence" that puts human relationship at the centre of professional skills; (2) assume intercultural competences as key competences transversal to different professions; (3) introduce social skills and reflection as key factors for developing a transformative model of lifelong learning (Jarvis, 2005) that able to match the needs of the current complex, ever-changing societies; and (4) develop experiential learning without giving up to a strong theoretical framework of reference. The programme introduces an educational model that matches the main goals of higher educational priorities started by Bologna Process and relies upon a solid theoretical framework developed in the field of intercultural research at a sociological, socio-psychological and pedagogical level (Bennett, 1993; Gudykunst & Ting, 2002; Camilleri & Cohen, 1989; Hall, 1959; Hofstede 2001; Beck & Grande, 2006; Farr, 1984), as well as in one of the lifelong learning (Le Boteurf, 1997; Illeris, 2005; Jarvis, 2005; Schön, 1983).

Key words: intercultural competence; transformative learning; holistic approach; social skills; reflective practice

1. Introduction: The learning pathway and main topics of analysis

This paper presents some innovative suggestions in the field of vocational training, it is developed within an ERASMUS lifelong learning intensive programme called ICIC (Interdisciplinary Course of Intercultural Competences) involving six European (Italian, Belgian, Hungarian, Finnish, Turkish and Swiss) partner institutions concerned with higher education. ICIC is a programme of transnational mobility aimed at building an innovative approach to intercultural competency within privileged learning conditions. It gave life to an interdisciplinary intensive module, focused on the development of intercultural competences within three

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professional domains: education, social work, and health care. This paper wants to highlight to what extent this educational pathway, starting from a holistic understanding of human learning, provides an innovative approach to experiential learning within professional training, so to match the main aims of European higher educational programmes, such as: (1) tuning between vocational training and academic education; (2) testing innovative methodologies in the intercultural training; (3) using reflection as a powerful didactical means in the vocational training; and (4) implementing innovative practices of lifelong education within privileged (international and interdisciplinary) educational contexts.

The course involves 12 teachers coming from partner institutions and 43 students (future educators, social workers, health care professionals and nurses) attending at least the second year course of their curricula. The course consists of a preparatory work mainly based on distance learning and a face-to-face part consisting of twelve days of intensive activities.

In the preliminary part, participants are asked to implement theoretical inputs and to accomplish some structured assignments by using a shared digital learning platform (Dileahs) organized in steps. Dileahs aims at: (1) fostering a first socialization between people from different countries and with different (academic, vocational) educational backgrounds; (2) facilitating the introduction to intercultural topics thanks to the presence of e-tutors that stimulate interaction through different communication channels (forum, chat, virtual classrooms, etc.); (3) enhancing participants' self-assessment, through self-exploration tests; and (4) activating communicative and reflective skills within shared virtual contexts of discussion.

Face to face sessions consist of twelve days of intensive learning activities carried out in the place of particular intercultural interest (Gent and Brussels for the first edition, Izmir for the second one). During this phase all participants, students and teachers, meet and start an educational pathway aimed at operationalising the theoretical patterns introduced in the first online part. This part is based on a combination of methodologies taken from different disciplinary approaches aimed at training experiential learning at every level (cognitive, emotional, motory and relational) and making it coherent with theoretical frames thanks to the systematic use of enhanced reflective practices.

2. A holistic approach to intercultural training: The human relationship at the centre of professional competences

According to "Lisbon strategy", access to lifelong learning has become the key to fully participating in society, in fact it matches the need of continuously renewing people's skills in order to meet the challenges of ever-evolving technologies, increasing internationalisation and demographic changes of the current knowledge societies.

As pointed out by Jarvis in the wake of Scheler's (1926) classification of knowledge, late modern society is characterized by innovative/transformative learning able to match the needs of a de-institutionalised and in step with innovations education (Jarvis, 2005, pp. 118-123). In fact, in complex societies, learning processes are more and more incorporated into the ordinary processes of everyday life, as a consequence of the increased unstableness of the social structures upon which people presume in their daily life (Berger-Luckmann, 1966). This unstableness affects common sense, for the taken-for-granted reign of evidences mainly build within consolidated inter-personal experiences and at the basis of the social competencies, thus bringing about a state of perpetual disjuncture between past experience and future expectations. That is why "maintenance learning", typical of

pre-modern and proto-modern societies, does no longer fit the needs of current society.

Moreover, any lifelong learning moves along a territory, partly concerned with the cognitive pole of individual acquisition of some task oriented skills, and partly with "social competencies", is a set of skills, knowledge and attitudes that unfold on the axis of external interaction: participation, communication and cooperation, in a word, "socialization". ICIC mainly privileged the second dimension, neither neglecting the cognitive, nor the emotional side of human learning, but rather by considering the psychic processes concerned with both knowledge and emotions in an interactionistic and constructionistic perspective.

According to Illeris' triangle, that locates different theoretical approaches to learning according to their emphasis on individual or environment (2005, pp. 97-100), this module places itself among those approaches that consider the cognitive and emotional dimensions as inseparable from the social one (see Figure 1).
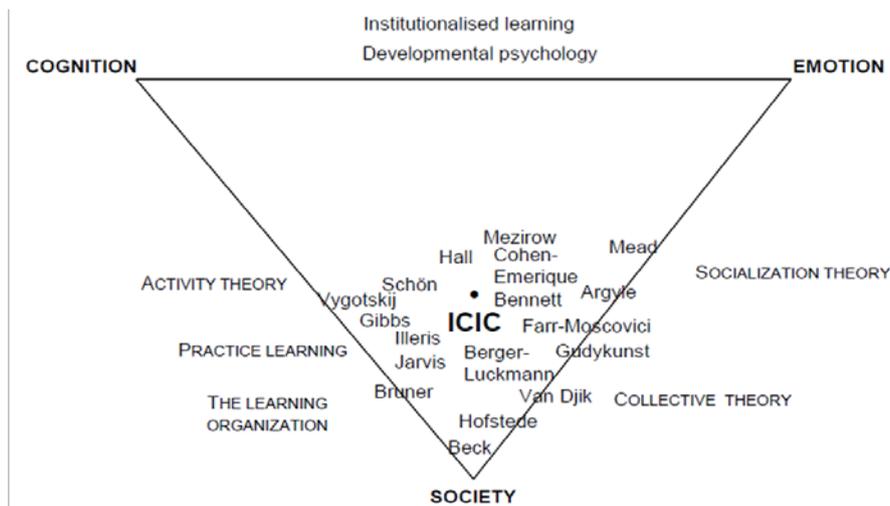

Figure 1   Adaptation to ICIC of Illeris' triangle (Illeris, 2005, p. 91)

ICIC is centred on the development of "intercultural competences" within the professional domains of education, social-work and health-care. Intercultural competences are dealt with from a holistic perspective that considers the individual not as an isolated entity, but as an integral part of a wider relational system. A holistic approach applied to learning processes means to consider culture and knowledge as an integral part of learning (Illeris, 2005) and to develop a broad concept of "intercultural competencies" in which social context and culture play a central role.

In this programme, intercultural competences are considered as key competences transversal to different professional fields, in which all three dimensions implied by human action—awareness, knowledge and communication—are involved. They are dealt with as a multidimensional expertise moving along the triple axis of cognition (knowledge), interaction (communication) and reflective reworking of emotions (awareness). According to the holistic perspective, all these factors are analysed by different disciplinary approaches joined by a constructionistic and interactionistic understanding of knowledge and identity.

The various disciplinary perspectives provided a fecund methodological triangulation, in which the social dimension was ever present thanks to a groundbreaking combination of formal and informal learning. Indeed all involved disciplines shared the pragmatic assumption of attaching cognitive value to experience, considered as the main source of knowledge, thus acknowledging the cognitive value of informal learning as an integral part of experiential knowledge. Hence the strong multidisciplinary nature of this programme and the great importance

attached to practice and reflective reworking of field experience.

ICIC articulated in three cognitive movements that also worked as macro-goals of this educational tool: diversification, reflection and tuning; reflection let experience be reworked through enhanced meta-cognitive processes and made coherent with other learning experiences.

3. The body as a social field at the basis of diversification- and tuning-skills

The complex society claims that, "transformative" learning (Jarvis, 2005, p. 117) is able to match the need for continuous updates arising from the increased heterogeneity of society. In such a perspective, informal learning becomes an important source of new knowledge, especially in those professional domains by definition centred upon interpersonal relationship.

The transformative learning developed by ICIC assumes diversification and tuning as the basic cognitive strategies of intercultural work: Tuning means bridging differences without effacing them; Diversification meant activating different learning channels, in which the social competencies trained through the body played a central role and become itself a principle for tuning. "Tuning" means: (1) bridging the differences between the involved professions and between academic and vocational education; (2) bridging different cultural and communicative contexts, thanks to the blended methodology, that alternates distance learning to mobility abroad; and (3) bridging formal and informal learning, thus making interculturality work not only the object of study (What it is about), but also the condition of its unfolding (What it is made of).

Social skills and the percipient body, along which they unfold, become the keys for a transformative learning aimed at developing the intercultural capability of "diversifying" and "tuning". In an intercultural perspective, the effective carrying out a task requires an appropriate coping with the misunderstandings raised by the different cultural backgrounds. Effectiveness has to do with goals of interaction, while appropriateness has to do with the adequate symbolic estimation of the situation, in which not only the mind, but the whole person's body and emotions are involved. In the intercultural perspective, task-oriented skills fed by formal learning cannot be separated from the informal learning arising from the actual exposure to the other's "diversity". Diversification and tuning are treated as strategies of "cognitive integration" aimed at putting the (future) practitioner at the centre of a complex social process whereby the whole person with his/her body and mind is called to transform cognitively, emotively and practically his/her past knowledge and experiences in order to re-use them within new situations. That is why full immersion, interdisciplinary and the alternation of different learning methods became crucial strategies, all joint by the emphasis on the cognitive and relational nature of experience.

Students and teachers are plunged into a situation of full immersion, as the contact part of ICIC takes place abroad and gathers people who are from different countries, speaking different languages, with different cultural, religious and educational backgrounds. The informal dimension activated by full immersion is "kept alive" also during more formal educational moments (keynotes and workshops), all based on strongly immersive methods, in which interaction, cooperation and communication were always active. A methodological triangulation, ranging from ethnographic methods drawn from qualitative sociology and cultural anthropology, critical incidents of cultural shock (Camilleri & Cohen, 1989) used by anti-racist pedagogy, and the role playing typical in the socio-psychological approach to learning on the job (Argyle, 1994), let the intercultural competency actually unfold not only on the cognitive axis, but also on the one of socialization and communication. This multiple unfolding is kept together by reflection, which helped students conceptualize and easily shift from personal and

contingent situations to more abstract and theoretical ones. The first social skill activated by intercultural work, which is decentralizing from a given-for-granted image of self, is elicited by that situation of cohabitation and its need to share sense making strategies among people socialized to different frameworks. Identity, as well as cognitive strategies activated by apparently innocent daily situations presuming on common sense, reveal their learned, cultural, interactive and negotiated nature (Cooley, 1922; Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959).

All learning activities are carried out in international and inter-professional group work, led according to the collaborative principle of roles' alternation, positive interdependence, peer-assessment and self-assessment. According to the holistic and interactionistic perspectives, the axis of social skills which is particularly enhanced not simply by group activities, but by organizing activities in a way that the body, considered both as a perceptive and as a motory subject, is at the centre of the learning process. The body is treated within this programme as a social field, in which not only intra-psychic, but rather social and cultural dynamics providing matter and form to the psychic processes are at work (Jodelet, 1994, p. 80).

Many ICIC's workshops are, in fact, devoted to intercultural communication, trained both on the level of the interpersonal dynamics into play within work situations, and on the level of stereotyping and reproduction of racist prejudice enhanced by mass-media. A workshop is centred on the use of Hoffman's (2000) TOPOI model in the communication on job between people from different cultures; another one is centred on the use of short movies showing situations of cultural shock, considered as the starting point of a learning process aimed at dismantling the symbolic framework of the audiovisual representation and bringing into the light the culturally oriented nature of perception, fully embedded within social representations. Another learning activity also centred on the whole involvement of the body is the case study: an intercultural critical incident submitted to international and interprofessional subgroups which were asked to activate collaborative strategies of problems solving, to schematize their possible solutions through the use of mind-maps and finally to "dramatize" them through role plays. Role playing proves to be very effective in assessing and enhancing social skills, as it puts the whole body, both through motory abilities and perception, at the centre of social interaction (Argyle, 1994, p. 107). The intercultural game "Rafa-Rafa" is another moment in which the motory side of social skills is trained: Participants are divided into two groups each playing a different culture, but whose rules are unknown to the opposite one; the rules are gradually disclosed to the participants by their physical (even body-to-body) exposure and incursion in the opposite culture, passing through effects of bewilderment, irritation up to intolerance owing to the ignorance of the other's rules. Finally, the activity of neighbourhood's exploration, aimed at disclosing the changing social morphology of the towns owing to the emerging of new ethnical segmentations among the urban population, is led so as to diversify the learning sources and to enhance social skills within intercultural competency. The exploration is in fact made in small international groups that, through a cooperative field work of collecting information (interviews to privileged witness, site-visits to special organizations and video shootings) build a sort of anthropological map of the social organization of differences in multi-ethnical contexts, which would be later exchanged among the different working groups and re-used for further explorations.

4. Reflection as a methodological device for reworking experiential learning and theoretical frames

Reflection plays a fundamental role in ICIC approach to experiential learning. Intercultural competences trained in ICIC imply the aware mobilisation of knowledge, attitudes, personal and social skills, by applying one's

own prior learning and skills and doubting one's own certainties, in a way that improves reflective capabilities. Enhancing intercultural competences means to cope with the conflicts that emerge in the clash with diversity not merely by living them, but by reflecting upon them, verbalising facts, questioning behaviours, analysing espoused and practised values and negotiating about them.

The pedagogical relevance of reflection was stressed first of all by Dewey (1974, p. 247), who regarded reflection as a fundamental cognitive process, through which people detect and establish relationships between facts and data. Afterwards, emotional and social dimensions were introduced in reflective learning theories. If Dewey considered reflection as a highly rational and controlled thinking process, Boud, Keogh and Walker emphasized the affective aspects, considered at once as stimulants and barriers to reflection in learning. They regarded reflection as an interaction between thought, feelings and action, so as to provide meaning, instigate further action and turn experience into learning (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985, p. 11). Kolb and Fry further explored the reflective practice by the well known experiential learning circle (Kolb & Fry, 1975), a continuous learning spiral in which four phases follow one another, each representing the possible starting point of the learning cycle: Reflection on experience leads to theoretical awareness and planning a future action, which in turn becomes the object of further reflection and theory building.

Schön took this concept a stage further, by considering action integral part of reflective practice. He looked for an "epistemology of practice" implicit in the intuitive processes activated by some practitioners in situations of value conflict (Schön, 1983, p. 49). He strongly linked reflection and action (or practice), paving the way to the enhanced models of reflective process such as the single learning loop cycle (Korthagen, 1985), and its refinements double and triple learning loops models (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Stroobants, Chambers & Clarke, 2008). Learning loops models are particularly relevant in coping with intercultural issues: A learning process that questions the values on the basis of people's actions leading them towards a transformation of their values and hence of their ultimate actions (Clarke & Chambers, 1999). These models help to work when salient events and unexpected outcomes of people's actions astonish them, provoking them to open up their minds to new perspectives and way of thinking. They create a positive framework for transformative learning needed to overcome intercultural misunderstandings (see Figure 2).
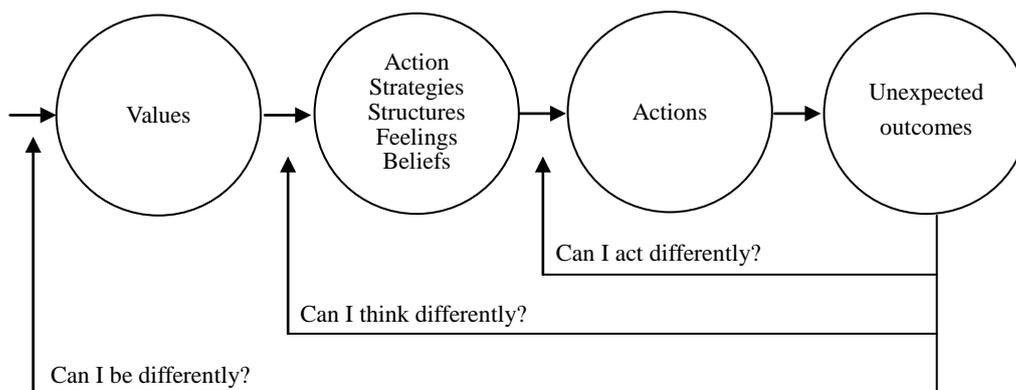

Figure 2   The triple learning loop model

Moving from Schön's idea of reflective practice, Mezirow put the emphasis on the transformative relevance of critical reflection that questions core beliefs, values and everything people take for granted, by putting them in front of things they would not know about themselves. It involves,

An enhanced level of awareness of the context of one's beliefs and feelings, a critique of their assumptions and particularly premises, an assessment of alternative perspectives, a decision to negate an old perspective in favour of a new one or to make a synthesis of old and new. (Mezirow, 1991, p. 161)

Reflective practice, learning loops models and transformative learning are on the basis of the methodological and didactical choices of ICIC. Reflection works as an ideal ring joining theory to practice, enhancing the relevance of interlaces between biographies, workplace settings and training opportunities in building up competences. It allows participants to rework experiences under theoretical lenses, thus helping them understand the dynamics, behaviours and dimensions that characterize an intercultural relationship. Reflection provides bridges between formal and informal learning, since it fostered shifting from incidental learning produced by any human experience to intentional learning. In ICIC, theoretical inputs were integrated in action. Participants are expected to build up their own operational models for activating intercultural dynamics and achieving awareness of theories underpinning their reactions. Models and theories are treated as principles providing lenses that may frame experiences within a coherent knowledge background and let them be reworked, improved and transferred to different contexts. In ICIC, three relevant elements are particularly taken into account in organising people's reflective activities:

(1) Getting back to experience and valuing salient events;

(2) Utilising positive feelings and removing obstructing ones in view of a rational understanding of events;

(3) Becoming aware of occurring processes and related strategies, beliefs, structures and values.

Salient events are raised by activating narrative resources or using multimedia materials, as well as through role playing, group dynamics and full immersion in a challenging field and are valued by using the critical learning incident approach, together with a wide range of reflecting tools such as questionnaires, diaries and logs. Critical incidents are used as triggers of reflection and learning, they are considered as salient events able to arise emotions that leave an impression on the individual and his/her life history because of the unique or special meaning they hold, the way in which they create an awareness of what is happening and they remind views and biases (Scanlan, Care & Udod, 2002).

Any experience drawn from work as well from daily life serves as a critical learning incident, insomuch it helps participants become aware of important aspects of their professional behaviours. In the analysis of critical incident, we enter a reflective circle including different steps, ranging from the evocative narration of contexts and events, to integrating feelings proved in the situation, looking back at the event and describing it, and finally planning possible different scenarios.

The analysis of critical incidents provides a twofold benefit: a genuine insight into learners' everyday practices and a less demanding reflective situation as learners are not asked to provide abstract definitions of their professional practice. It proves to foster transformative learning, insomuch as it activated a reflective process able to explore one's own tacit values and make them transparent, cast a new light upon those emotional elements of a conflict of beliefs and change perspective.

In ICIC, reflective processes are fostered according to the enhanced version of Gibb's (1988) reflective circle (see Figure 3). During the preliminary on-line phase participants are asked to introduce themselves to their colleagues by using the web platform and to assess their intercultural attitudes through an on-line self-assessment test, in order to promote reflective attitudes since the beginning. In the presentations, they have to select from their life relevant experiences, motivations and features that characterise their attitudes in coping with diversity. Self-assessment tests ask to react to challenging events assumed as potential critical incidents and to describe a

possible behaviour in specific situations that appeal to stereotyped representations, thus to question common sense. Reflection, both in on-line and in face-to-face activities, are always accompanied by tutors, who use "open" questions so as to raise doubts and foster discussion, in order to avoid desirable statements. Participants have to recognise the pervasive influence of respective cultures and stereotypes on judgements, behaviours and relational dynamics.
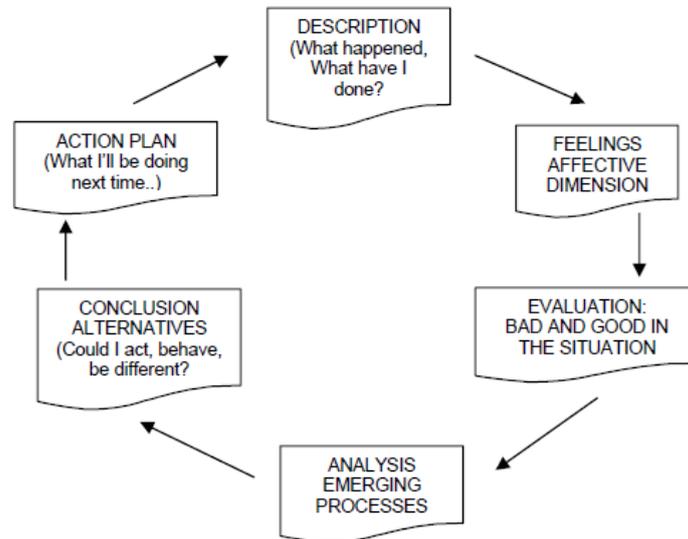

Figure 3   The "reflective cycle"—Enhanced version (Gibbs, 1988)

A fundamental tool used in ICIC to facilitate reflective processes is the reflective diary, which participants have to write day by day during the intensive phase of the programme. The diary acts as a bridge between different levels of psychic functioning, by integrating thinking and feeling, concepts and perception, in fact it commits the participants with reworking their experiences on field also by evoking the involved feelings, emotions and cognitive conquests.

Diaries are not pre-structured, they just give hints that provide learners with a story-board useful to reflect on action and left an almost complete freedom of style. Participants are asked to assess and synthesise their learning outcomes, as a genuine source able to remind them emotions, feelings, events and incidents lived during the two weeks of activities. Diaries help them integrate cognitive, emotional and relational dimensions of learning processes in a coherent way, according to a constructivist perspective.

In general, reflection brings learning to further achievements, by helping students develop a mature intercultural sensitivity and finally bridge the gap between espoused and practised values.

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