

Amateur online interculturalism in foreign language education

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Abstract. This paper discusses the animated web series *Lifeswap* as an example for ‘amateur online interculturalism’ and investigates its potential for intercultural language education. Drawing on [Dervin’s \(2015\)](#) discussion on the ‘amateur interculturalist’, I suggest that online publications of personal encounters of intercultural interaction can be used to foster critical reflection in intercultural language education. To illustrate this idea, I first introduce the concept of ‘amateur online interculturalism’ and the approach of the makers of the *Lifeswap* series. I then focus on one episode to provide an example of the series and to show how humour and cultural stereotypes can be used constructively to explore tensions in intercultural interactions. The online comments I present in the last section highlight the harmonising effect of humour but indicate that pedagogical intervention is needed to problematise intercultural issues.

Keywords: interculturalism, amateur interculturalist, lifeswap, humour.

1. Introduction

Growing mobility and increased opportunities to publish and share personal impressions of encounters with people of other cultures have resulted in new resources for intercultural language education. The travel blog *matador*, for example, publishes regular posts of travellers, such as “Are Germans rude? Killing the stereotypes after living in Berlin”. Shared on social networks, these personal accounts are exposed to a wide audience, natives and sojourners alike, often leading to animated discussions on incidents described by the authors.

I will refer to these accounts of personal intercultural experiences, which are shared with an online audience and discussed amongst this audience as ‘amateur online interculturalism’. I have borrowed the term from [Dervin \(2015\)](#), who associates

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How to cite this article: Alm, A. (2016). Amateur online interculturalism in foreign language education. In S. Papadima-Sophocleous, L. Bradley, & S. Thoučšny (Eds), *CALL communities and culture – short papers from EUROCALL 2016* (pp. 25-31). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.eurocall2016.533>

positive qualities with ‘amateur’, as it derives from old French, the ‘lover of’. The authors and participants of ‘amateur’ online publications are guided by their personal and often uncritical views, yet they manifest a passion for the encountered cultures and a fascination for observed personal transformations. At the same time, these views are presented as perspectives rather than truths and invite comments for discussion. These testimonies (online publications and the ensuing conversations) lend themselves to analysis in intercultural education as they provide students with a personal point of reference (descriptions reflecting their own experiences), which can then be taken to a more critical and reflective level.

This paper discusses the animated web series *Lifeswap* as an example of ‘amateur online interculturalism’ and investigates its potential for intercultural language education. The term ‘amateur interculturalist’ has been coined by [Dervin \(2015\)](#) in reference to [Saïd’s \(1996\)](#) concept of the ‘intellectual amateur’. It describes the intercultural practitioner or researcher who is not conditioned by essentialist intercultural theories and instead questions container models of culture. The ‘amateur interculturalist’ (unlike the ‘professional interculturalist’) is aware that people are not defined by their culture and recognises that each individual has multiple identities, which are not only context-dependent but also change over time. The object of intercultural study is therefore never only the ‘other’ but also the ‘self’ and the dialogue between the two in a specific context.

Increasing global mobility and the ability to communicate and publish online has produced another type of amateur interculturalist. Equally guided by their love and passion for intercultural encounters, amateur *online* interculturalists share personal experiences and observations with an online audience. It has been noted that the contact with people of different cultural backgrounds, especially in computer-mediated communication, does not necessarily lead to increased intercultural awareness and that on the contrary “can contribute to creating more stereotypes, negative and positive representations about the self and the other” ([Dervin, 2014](#), p. 192). Yet it could also be argued that the open forum in which these reports are published can potentially create a space for critical reflection. Furthermore, the interactions on intercultural issues can be valuable material for intercultural language education.

2. Method

With the aim of establishing an example of ‘amateur online interculturalism’ and of exploring its suitability for intercultural language education, the following

materials have been analysed: (1) documents produced by the authors of *Lifewrap* about their web series (interviews, funding application, *Lifewrap* blog <http://www.lifewrap.net/>), (2) the second episode, *The Tea Towel Stinks*, and (3) comments from viewers on episode two from the *Lifewrap* blog, a Vimeo site as well as from university language students on their learner blogs.

3. Discussion

3.1. The *Lifewrap* interculturalists

The producers of the series are not trained interculturalists, rather they are participants and observers of intercultural encounters. The fictional characters of *Lifewrap*, Jörg from Germany and Duncan from New Zealand, represent, according to the scriptwriter William Connor, an “alter-ego duo through which we could ‘earth’ the various frustrations, hilarities and intriguing cultural differences we had discovered repeating themselves whenever Steffen [Kreft] and I visited each other’s countries” (Ritchie, 2014, p. 19). Both Connor and Kreft had compiled ‘secret mental lists’ of intercultural incidents over the years. The use of humour can provide a safe place for the examination of potentially uncomfortable issues (MacIntyre, 2014) and the creation of a humorous context for their experiences allowed them to deal with these incidents in a playful manner. Each episode captures a particular ‘rich point’ (Agar, 1994), to which, as Kreft put it “as many specific situations, archetypes and phrases” were added to achieve “maximum funniness and recognisable idiosyncratic scenarios within a tight and manageable animation” (Ritchie, 2014, p. 19).

Humorous and exaggerated cultural stereotypes can be used constructively to identify and overcome tensions in intercultural interactions (MacIntyre, 2014). It is particularly powerful if the participants are able to laugh about themselves, and as it is the case in *Lifewrap*, if both cultures are targeted.

The episodes of the on-going series are framed by a *Skype* conversation between Duncan, who is described by the authors as “a familiar Kiwi OE candidate in his mid twenties”, and Jörg, “a typically polite, well-equipped German traveller, who is passionate about ‘za nature’” (Funding application, n.p.). Connor gives the characters their stereotypical language, and Kreft’s illustrations support the humorous intent of the dialogues. Jörg and Duncan have *swapped lives*, or at least their flats, for a year and in their stereotyped appearance (clothing, accents) they seem oddly out of place in their equally stylised new environment: Jörg


skypes from his bedroom, a room of a typical New Zealand 1920s bungalow with wooden doors and window frames, whereas Duncan sits in a very plain and tidy German living room.

3.2. The genesis of episode two

The idea for the episode is born out of an anecdote, a personal encounter with ‘German directness’ (see Figure 1). The request for a new tea towel, because the old one stinks, has an unexpected effect on the Kiwi. “I was taken aback... but I was also taken aback by how taken aback I was”. His emotional reaction made him reflect on his cultural conditioning, and how indirectness might appear to somebody from a different cultural background.

Figure 1. Blog post on second episode²

How a smelly tea-towel inspired episode two...



Well, it all started when Steffen's mother, Margot, came to visit us in New Zealand. One afternoon we were enjoying a cross cultural dish-washing session, when all of a sudden, Margot turned to me and said:

"William, the tea towel stinks. You need a new one."

I was taken aback, not only by this wonderful example of German directness - the streamlined, teutonic "subject, verb, object" model of sentence construction - but I was also taken aback by how taken aback I was.

The fact is, life in New Zealand is generally pretty simple and easy; that is, until a problem needs confronting. At which point we Kiwis engage in a weirdly elaborate series of rituals including red-faced silences, eye-averting and all manner of verbal apologies, softeners and excuses. One feels compelled to perform a kind of musical act to avoid explaining what the problem is; it commonly involves a small jerky dance of shrugs, hand-wringing and facial contortions and a sing song of polite words.

So, in episode two of *Lifewap*, Duncan teaches Joerg a five step method he has devised of confronting a New Zealander about a problem so as to cause only minimal offense. Watch this space!

2. <http://www.lifewap.net/2013/10/how-smelly-tea-towel-inspired-episode.html>

3.3. Episode 2

In the episode, Jörg commits the same faux pas as the real life Margot, telling his Kiwi flatmate Ange that he needs a fresh tea towel. He quickly realises his mistake and brings it up at their next Skype conversation. Duncan gives Jörg five unwritten rules, models the interaction (we see him instead of Jörg with Ange in the kitchen) and also makes him apply the rules in a new situation. The last scene shows Jörg mastering rule no. 2 (see [Figure 2](#)) in a different interaction with Ange.

Jörg manages to apply the five rules but neither his nor Duncan's behaviour is assimilistic. Throughout the dialogue he interjects in German (highlighting his objection). He defends his own cultural needs and after rule number four he seems to give up. He breaks out in a sweat and declares: "I think from now on I will just stay in my room". The ending indicates that he is keeping his sense of humour when applying rule number two. Duncan for his part acknowledges that he finds the directness he experiences in Germany "quite refreshing".

Figure 2. The Tea Towel Stinks on Vimeo³



3.4. Reactions

3.4.1. Reactions from blog and Vimeo

Lifeswap is published on the producers' blog, their Facebook page and on Vimeo, providing viewers with the option of commenting and sharing the stories. Kiwis,

3. <https://vimeo.com/81393966>

Germans, bi-cultural couples and families, and German teachers in New Zealand sympathise and identify with the characters and laugh about themselves. The ‘amateur online interculturalist’ responds to the feedback and encourages viewers to send him their own stories:

- Love this series! Episode 2 reminds me of an incident in my own house recently!
- This episode is awesome - I can def relate :) I can give you heaps of inspiration if needed - being a German married to a Kiwi, communication can get fuzzy at times :P
- Thanks. Would love to hear your experience! Fuzzy is a great word for it.

3.4.2. Reactions from students

Used as a warm-up in a language class on intercultural mis/communication, some students of my intermediate German class wrote about the episode in their blog (weekly blogging was an integral part of this class). They related the five rules of the episode to their own observations of indirectness in their flats, one involving a dirty tea towel and the other an empty water tank (Figure 3 and Figure 4). Student A from New Zealand is now noticing a behaviour that she had not noticed before. The comment is written by an exchange student from the Czech Republic who found the indirectness irritating. The *Lifeswap* episode put these behaviours in perspective and made “the strange familiar [student B] and the familiar strange [student A]” (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002, p. 19).

Figure 3. Blog post from student A

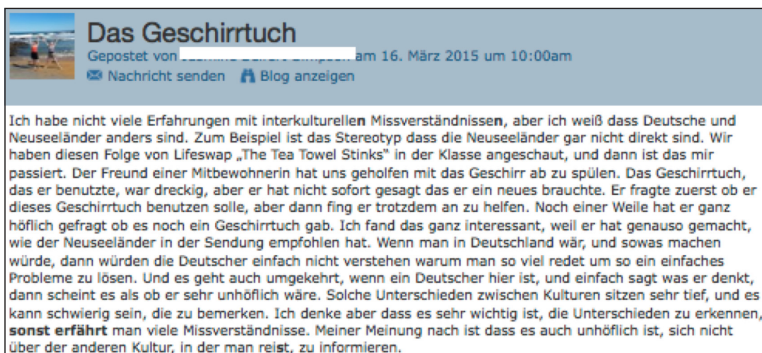
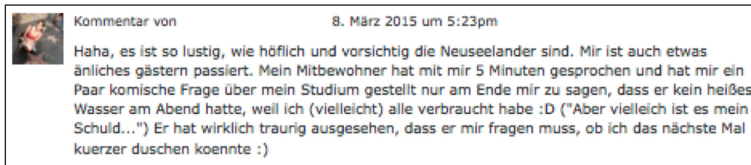


Figure 4. Comment from student B



4. Conclusion

I have described the makers of the animated web series *Lifeswap* as amateur online interculturalists. The intercultural interactions they portray in their episodes are based on personal anecdotes. They use humour to address intercultural differences, which has a harmonising effect. Comments indicate that viewers sympathise with the characters. For intercultural language education, however, it is crucial that these issues are problematised. The two-sided approach of *Lifeswap* (both cultures are explored) in particular invites investigations of both the ‘self’ and the ‘other’.

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Published by Research-publishing.net, not-for-profit association
Dublin, Ireland; Voillans, France, info@research-publishing.net

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CALL communities and culture – short papers from EUROCALL 2016
Edited by Salomi Papadima-Sophocleous, Linda Bradley, and Sylvie Thouéšny

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Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-44-5 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-1-908416-45-2 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

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Legal deposit, United Kingdom: The British Library.
British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: décembre 2016.