

Intercultural Learning Across Contexts*

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Abstract

International youth work in Europe (i.e. non-formal learning) demands a renewal of the prominent intercultural theory and framework in the youth field in order to cope with contemporary questions concerning pluralism and global challenges. This article provides a new theoretical framework for intercultural learning that departs from a complex, multicultural, social reality. Furthermore, the article explores how young people today experience international youth exchanges as arenas for learning in relation to other learning arenas in and out of school. The data consists of interviews and participant observation of a Norwegian youth group preparing for, participating in and reflecting on their experiences in an international youth exchange programme. The findings show that participation in international youth exchanges, in addition to cultural knowledge, may contribute to increased motivation for learning, enhanced self-understanding and personal growth that seems transferable to other contexts. Furthermore, global youth culture plays a crucial role in young people's experiences of being like one another across national borders, cultures and social realities.

Keywords: International youth exchange, Intercultural learning, Cultural diversity, Intercultural communication, Learner-identity.

Introduction

Since 1995, one of United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) overarching goals for formal and non-formal education in Europe has been learning to live together in a multicultural world (Delors, 1995). Organizing international cultural exchanges for young people has a long history as a pedagogical tool for supporting the development of positive attitudes towards foreign people, cultures and nations (Fennes & Hapgood, 1997). The Council of Europe, the European Commission and many European states and civil society organisations have historically brought forward programmes and strategies to enhance the international mobility of young people and intercultural learning both in and out of school (Friesenhahn et al., 2013). Today, intercultural learning is one key competence for all education in Europe. Lauritzen (1998) claims that intercultural learning is a project of political socialization for a democratic multicultural society, which has the best conditions outside the classroom

* The article reports findings from a PhD study that was defended in 2011 at University of Oslo, Faculty of Educational Sciences.

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and in international exchange programmes. This article reports findings from a PhD study that explores how young people experience international youth exchanges as arenas for learning in relation to other learning arenas both in and out of school (Vasbø, 2011; Vasbø, forthcoming).

What primarily characterizes my study, in contrast to previous studies, is that it aims to respond to issues and challenges highlighted by researchers, youth workers and young people in non-formal learning contexts (Gomes, 2009; Gomes & Cunha, 2008; Otten, 2009; Ramberg, 2009; Titley, 2005; 2008). Previous research has largely understood intercultural encounters in isolation from other learning contexts. However, this study explores international youth exchanges as learning arenas interlaced with other arenas in which young people participate and as part of an individual lifelong learning trajectory. The majority of previous research reports personal change, personal development and personal growth only to be spin-off effects of participating in international exchanges of youth and students; consequently, elements of identity development are not included as part of the expected learning outcome of intercultural learning processes. One exception is a study performed by Shames and Alden (2005) that highlights identity development as a result of participation in student exchanges. Shames & Alden (2005) report that these intercultural encounters are powerful arenas for learning, especially for young people who for various reasons do not succeed in school; this is because the participants are given opportunities to re-position themselves as learners, both for themselves and for others. In my study, attention is directed towards experiences and learning situations young people themselves consider essential and important within a longer learning trajectory and, furthermore, how these experiences affect their participation in other arenas. This study aims to explore how young people experience intercultural learning arenas and how they transform learning experiences from an international youth exchange into new situations across sites.

Intercultural learning in European youth work

Intercultural learning is a relatively new field in Europe (Fennes & Hapgood, 1997), although its roots can be traced back to the period after 1945. Post-war intercultural youth work was concerned with establishing communication between individuals from different nations in order to achieve reconciliation and peace (Otten, 2009). The key work was aimed at combating prejudice by discovering cultural similarities (Roth, 1999). The intercultural youth field today demands a renewal of the intercultural theory and framework in order to deal with contemporary questions concerning pluralism and global challenges (Ramberg, 2009; Gomes, 2009). Several critical voices argue that intercultural youth work in Europe has not been able to renew itself and that old ideas oriented towards cultural equality and not towards cultural differences still rule the field (Roth, 1999). Although new methods and new teaching materials have been developed through practice, seminars and evaluation, there has been very little systematic recording of the practical outcomes of the achievements made during these two decades of intercultural work (Ramberg, 2009).

Gavan Titley claims that European intercultural youth work is in a deep crisis (2008; 2005). Titley points out two main reasons for the occurrence of the crisis. First, intercultural learning has no solid educational philosophy or practice form because intercultural education and learning in European youth work is, according to Titley, 'a Google baby' (2005, p. 74). Titley claims that the intercultural concepts in use are constructed through a circulation of theories, practices, models, modules and resources that have been developed and created through a variety of approaches, such as training programmes for the development of cultural awareness within financial businesses or foreign affairs (Titley, 2008). The second cause of the crisis stems from

the old concept of culture used in European youth work, which aimed to identify the essence of each culture. Such a notion of culture appears to be out-of-date for individuals living in today's culturally complex and diverse world. Tittley (2008) claims that it is time to remove European intercultural training from what the anthropologist Ulf Hannerz describes as 'a culture shock prevention industry' (1992: 251). Both Tittley (2008) and Hannerz (1992) refer to the conventional part of the intercultural communication theory and research in which culture is perceived as predictable and unchanging. Such a perspective on culture takes place within various theories and models that perceive culture as a kind of mental programming (e.g. Hofstede, 1994); compare culture with an onion we can peel off layer by layer (e.g. Trompenaars, 1993); or compare culture with an iceberg (e.g. Hall, 1976) in which the top shows visible artefacts while the part below sea level represents all the non-visible attitudes and values that affect how we communicate and behave.

Steven Vertovec (2007) describes our contemporary social condition as super-diverse because people of the same origin, ethnic identity, language and religion identify themselves across and beyond previously given categories and patterns. Furthermore, globalization processes shape and form new social realities and create constant changes at the societal level, which define young people's context of life and their experiences (Suarez-Orozco, 2007). This situation creates new agendas for international youth work (Ramberg, 2009). In contemporary social anthropology, a contemporary and dynamic cultural perspective has developed as an option to the more traditional and static concept of culture. The concepts of 'cultural complexity' and 'cultural flows' indicate that culture is in constant motion (Hannerz, 1992). Movement, learning, meaning-making and symbols are perceived as key elements in communication, and cultural differences are understood as subjectively perceived and socially constructed. Hannerz opens his book *Cultural Complexity* with the following statement about the concept of culture: 'There have been times when they have used it to stand for even more, but in the recent period, culture has been above all a matter of meaning' (1992, p. 3). A new critical hermeneutic orientation within intercultural communication theory and research promotes a complex and dynamic concept of culture. Meaning-making plays a key role in this perspective. It seems to be time to develop a new and different theoretical framework for intercultural learning in European youth work, and this article promotes a critical hermeneutic theoretical approach in order to renew the concept of intercultural learning in our contemporary society.

Method

A qualitative research design

The article is based on an ethnographic study of a Norwegian youth group who prepare for, participate in and finally reflect upon their experiences in an international youth exchange. Over a period of ten months, I followed three girls and three boys in their daily activities at an out-of-school centre. The target group of this particular out-of-school centre are potential school dropouts (Markussen et al., 2008) or are simply young people who are tired of school. These individuals are struggling in their transition between lower secondary and upper secondary school. The out-of-school centre aims to develop their ability to participate in further education or work-life by giving them a choice between thematic workshops (canteen, computer, car or carpenter) and extra help with upper secondary school subjects. Alternatively, they obtain student status, which means that they can attend an ordinary upper secondary course at a slower speed, in collaboration with the out-of-school centre as a support team. As part of the programme at the out-of-school centre, these six girls and boys participated in an international youth exchange in Brazil for two weeks that was supported by the

European Union programme Youth in Action. In Brazil, they met other young people from a variety of social backgrounds in Chile, Slovakia, Portugal and Brazil.

The majority of studies on intercultural learning are based on interview surveys designed to give an overview of many informants. The advantage of such surveys is that all informants are asked the same questions in the same way, while the disadvantage is that there is no room for follow-up questions or spontaneous comments (Bryman, 2008). Examining experiences from a participant's perspective can take place within quantitative research; however, this particular study aims to develop an action-perspective over a longer time span. This is something survey interviews are not able to do. Qualitative research is designed to explore and understand the reality as perceived by the people who are studied. Qualitative researchers study phenomena in their natural surroundings while attempting to obtain or interpret phenomena in light of the meaning the research subjects put into them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

This study uses ethnographic methods (Heath & Street, 2008; Holland et al., 1998), research interviews and participant observations gathered with and without a video camera. The total data corpus is complex. Over a ten-month period, I spent approximately 70 hours at the out-of-school centre making audio recordings, writing field notes and conducting semi-structured interviews with participants prior to departure and six months after returning home. These interviews comprise 18 hours of audio data. In addition, I have audio data from informal conversations with the out-of-school manager and staff as well as the participants. From the youth exchange in Brazil, I have approximately 15 hours of video recordings, 4 gigabytes of photos, audio recordings and field notes from participant observations and informal conversations.

I made use of thematic analysis for the analytic work, which is one of the most common approaches to qualitative data. According to Ryan and Bernard (2003), different themes are present both in the empirical data and in the researcher's theoretical understanding of the phenomenon he or she is studying. In other words, thematic analysis involves being open to the themes that emerge in the research field while the researcher relates to the same field with a theoretical sensitivity (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The first themes emerge in the interview guide; although these are inspired by the theory, they are also partly empirically driven because they are related to responses in the empirical data (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The project followed research ethical guidelines, and all names of persons are fictitious.

Theoretical background- An eclectic theoretical research contribution

Research on organized cultural encounters for young people takes place within a complex field comprising many different disciplines and research traditions; however, this research takes place to a very small extent in the field of education. Therefore, one of my main intentions was to prepare groundwork for exploring and investigating intercultural learning within educational research. The intercultural communication research field is particularly interested in cultural encounters, how we communicate across cultures and the beliefs we have about people with backgrounds in cultures other than our own. I have developed a new theoretical perspective on intercultural learning through creating a link between the critical hermeneutic tradition of intercultural communication theory and the sociocultural theories of learning, which represent the main theoretical contributions offered by this study.

The notion of culture used in critical hermeneutic intercultural communication traditions (see Dahl, 2006; Jensen, 2004; Illman, 2004; Svane, 2004; Nynäs, 2001) differs from the concept of culture used in intercultural communication research in general. The critical hermeneutic orientation claims that meaning-making through

dialogue is characteristic of communication in cultural encounters. This perspective requires a close connection between culture, everyday life and communication. Within this perspective, a common understanding between people across cultural borders is mainly related to making meaning together in specific interpersonal processes. Meaning-making through dialogue is also essential in the sociocultural theory of learning everyday knowledge. The close connection between learning and identity has been highlighted within the sociocultural tradition (Gee, 1999; Lemke, 1990; Wenger, 1998). When experiences and knowledge are generated through social interaction, learning takes place (Vygotsky, 1987), and social identification and theoretical knowledge are interrelated processes involved in an individual learner identity (Wortham, 2006). The dialogical perspective provided by Bakhtin emphasizes the 'other', or the difference, as essential for individual learning and identity development (Rommetveit, 2004). Bakhtin's dialogical perspective can constitute a theoretical bridge between the perspective of critical hermeneutic intercultural communication theory and a sociocultural theory of learning.

Using a dynamic and complex concept of culture requires a change in our expectation of the outcomes of intercultural learning processes. The new perspective turns away from pre-defined terms of intercultural learning towards a more open approach highlighting the individual experience of the intercultural encounter as most relevant. Meaning is created within interpersonal interaction in which an individual's interpretation and communication is based on their context-bound everyday experiences. Through these dialogues, individuals transfer and produce meaning (Holland et al., 1998), while cultural processes occur and are maintained by the participants. Within these perspectives, culture and knowledge are woven together in the concept of meaning-making. Thus, intercultural learning is based on making meaning across different life skills and experiences. Furthermore, in this study I investigate how individuals draw experiences from intercultural encounters into other learning contexts and various social practices in their everyday life.

This new perspective on intercultural learning is far more capable than the more mainstream and traditional perspective for interpreting what is required as important skills and experiences in complex cultural situations, such as the ones we face in our globalized and multicultural world. From this perspective, all social interaction in cultural encounters is perceived as learning activities. What the sociocultural learning theory and the critical hermeneutic intercultural communication theory have in common is the weighting of a dialogical and interactional perspective. The attention is directed towards the encounter with 'the other' in oneself and the encounter with 'the other' outside oneself. This bridge-building between theories contributes to a more open approach towards intercultural learning that arises in young people's lives in their contemporary world.

Empirical Results

Unlike the dominant quantitative research in the field on student exchanges, this study is qualitative and focuses on a very limited number of informants over a longer time-span. The first and overarching finding is the diverse picture of identity and learning processes that emerge through the various individual learning trajectories. This finding is based on the six different participant's descriptions of their experiences transitioning between secondary and upper secondary education. Every person represents different resources, and what kind of knowledge a person brings from one learning context to another will influence how she or he experiences the actual context. Individual learner identity consists of a wide range of learning experiences that a person draws from different contexts, including those gained out of school and in school. After one year at the out-of-school centre, five of the six informants went on to upper secondary school.

Looking back on their experiences during the year, these five young people noted that the experiences they gained through participation in the youth exchange were particularly significant for their choice to go into a vocational education programme and were crucial for which future profession they chose to orient themselves towards. During the last interview, they all brought up various important academic and social experiences they gained during the youth exchange. These experiences included doing things they never imagined they could do, such as speaking English with strangers, presenting group work in English in front of the whole youth exchange and going hiking in the mountains. They explained that their changed perspectives were because of the socially appreciative environments they experienced with the youth participating at the exchange and in the encounters with other people in the streets or in different villages in Brazil. Furthermore, they noted that their increased self-confidence and enhanced self-understanding stemmed from a more reflective view of their own role in social interactions and a stronger sense of themselves as 'someone who is good at something'. This view was a direct consequence of their participation in youth exchange programmes, and the participants were decisive in their conviction that they would complete upper secondary school. Experiencing a supportive learning environment appears to be essential for the development of a positive learner identity, which can help these young people succeed in other learning contexts, such as education (Wortham, 2006).

The second finding is that differences concerning nationality, language or ethnicity were perceived as irrelevant by the participants when they categorized the 'other' as different from or similar to themselves. The informants found it difficult to express what it meant to be a Norwegian or to characterize Norwegian culture. This may indicate that categories such as 'being a Norwegian' or 'Norwegian nationality' represented a traditional and outdated concept of culture without meaning for them. However, when I asked about how culture and cultural differences are expressed, their answers reflected a complex understanding of culture that is closely associated with knowledge and experiences from their own everyday life (Hannerz, 1992; Appadurai, 2001). The following statement illustrates how the informants experienced the others:

There was no difference between him and me, we shared the same interests. The only difference was the colour of our skin and appearance, if not I could have called him Jon Terje [the informants name]. And he liked to do the same things as we do: computers and football. He was so similar to us that it was almost painful. He was just like a Norwegian.

The third finding is that similarities and differences at the individual level were defined by the informants around issues such as 'interests, ways of behaving and life styles'. Interests and style were largely linked to global popular cultural expressions such as music, movies, computer games and clothes, but other types of leisure activities such as football and reading were also noted. Ways of behaving were closely linked to ways of communicating, forms of humour and attitudes towards smoking, drinking and school. Within a critical hermeneutic intercultural communication perspective on cultural encounters, differences are always open to interpretation because we are both similar and different from everyone we meet (Illman, 2004).

The fourth finding is based on finding two and three, and deals with a lack of questioning and reflection on differences that I observed at the out-of-school centre and within the pedagogical programme at the youth exchange. Although the informants did initiate reflections regarding differences between people and societies during the preparation phase at the out-of-school centre, these were not on the agenda in the formal learning situations. Furthermore, the adult trainers in Brazil did not include reflections or discussions concerning cultural/individual/value-related differences as

part of the programme activities. The young people were left to themselves when it came to interpreting and understanding differences between the participants from different countries and various life-worlds. Because the differences they experienced were not thematised within the pedagogical framework, these differences were both exaggerated and ignored at the same time by the participants. When they experienced something difficult that they did not understand, they constructed stereotypes of the others. These stereotypes are illustrated in the following statement: 'The others are only people who have good grades and they are sports-idiots and they do not smoke and cannot swear'. On the other hand, shared experiences through the global youth culture and popular culture sweep differences under the carpet and promote the idea of similarity. The global youth culture generates processes of meaning-making that constitute the basis for their experience of being like one another. The following statement from an interview with one participant illustrates this point: 'Actually, we could not tell who came from which country. We were really all similar in a way. We had the same interests and we were laughing of the same things and we did talk about the same things and we listen to the same music'.

The fifth finding concerns identity. In interviews held six months after the youth exchange, the participants discussed their learning experiences in the out-of-school centre and the youth exchange when they reflected on who they are, how they orient themselves within education and who they think they can be. Young people's identities are shaped through the social activities they take part in (Bakhtin et al., 1981; Bakhtin & Slaattelid, 2005). The following statement illustrates how the youth exchange was perceived as a learning arena by the participants: 'It was much more fun to learn on the exchange. I do not understand why it was so much fun, but it was so much more interesting'.

The sixth finding is that the social environment at the international youth exchange represented a complex experience of differences and cultural resources. The critical hermeneutic intercultural communication theory and the sociocultural learning theory polyphonic learning contexts are particularly fruitful in the sense of including many different kinds of differences because a young individual's experiences constitute a joint construction of reality when various voices reach out to each other (Bakhtin & Slaattelid, 2005). In line with Bakhtin & Slaattelid (2005), Holland et al. (1998) emphasize that identity is rooted in the social framework and changes in relation to this. A person may be composed of many, often inconsistent and even incoherent, self-understandings and changeable identities hidden in the social context, as this statement from one of the participants nicely shows: 'It was completely different surroundings and everything went so much easier. Everyone was so kind and friendly and I asked myself, what happens? That is why I did more than I thought I could manage'. My study documents various ways in which participants used resources from the polyphonic framework represented by the social environment at the youth exchange in the re-positioning of their own learner identity. This is explicitly accounted for in the new self-perceptions individuals carried with them from the youth exchange into new formal learning contexts (education or work) and how they made use of these new self-understandings as tools for action in new situations. The following statement from one of the informants illuminates this point: 'The fact that I did do the presentation of the group work (at the youth exchange) in English tells me that I can do much more than I thought I could do. I realize that I can really reach for more than I knew before'.

The seventh finding indicates that the international youth exchange affected the young people's learner identities in a positive direction to a greater extent than the out-of-school centre. This may be because the respondents were given more opportunities to re-position themselves in the social interaction together with youth from various

backgrounds than they had at the out-of-school centre. According to Holland et al. (1998), identity develops in a reciprocal relationship between how people position themselves in social interaction and how they are positioned by others.

The eighth finding shows that informal knowledge played a more prominent role in the learning activities at the international youth exchange than at the out-of-school centre. Because informal knowledge took place in the activities at the programme and outside the programme, the participants' informal knowledge was interwoven with the forms of knowledge that the exchange programme promoted. However, activities at the programme and outside the programme had different approaches towards culture. The adult trainers and other pedagogical staff who organized activities at the out-of-school centre and during the exchange in Brazil passed on a traditional approach towards culture. Whilst the programme activities, such as intercultural evenings, included a wide range of performances of traditional dances and presentations of traditional food that supported stereotypical characteristics of the countries involved in the exchange, the youth-initiated social activities related to global popular youth culture and shared interests arising from the young people's various life-worlds.

Conclusions

Based on the findings in this study, I conclude that organized intercultural youth-encounters are effective learning contexts for the development of social, communicative and cultural knowledge and skills related to learning to live together in a multicultural and complex world. Furthermore, participation in international youth exchanges may contribute to increased motivation for learning and enhanced self-understanding and personal growth. These types of knowledge are relevant in all 21st-century education (Binkley et al., 2010; Hartmeyer, 2008; Suárez-Orozco & Satting, 2007). However, we must keep in mind the words of Otten (2009) concerning how to succeed in implementing intercultural learning processes within international youth work. He suggests setting up specific goals for educational policies and providing sufficient conditions for their realization, otherwise one can only hope to succeed by pure chance. According to Titley (2008) and Otten (2009), the concept of intercultural learning must be a concept in transaction because 'We no longer live in a "post-World War II" situation when communication and reconciliation were the primary goals and intercultural learning processes were aligned with these goals' (Otten, 2009, p. 43). Most young people today experience a complex cultural reality, and youth workers, trainers and teachers in this field must cope with these realities when facilitating and organising learning activities. Furthermore, they must be able to thematise and explore differences together with the young people, even though this is difficult and challenging. How young people experience differences based on their social and cultural life-worlds concerning sensitive issues like religion and other relevant life perspectives should be explored in contemporary intercultural youth encounters. This exploration can equip young people with knowledge about what significant differences may be and provide them with tools to deal with differences in their everyday life. This is even more important today, when differences can be difficult to catch sight of through the varnish of similarity provided by the shared global youth culture.

In non-formal learning contexts, the learning objectives for intercultural learning are closely linked to personal growth (Otten, 2009), which is a point research within this field must take into account. In line with Shames and Alden (2005), I claim that making use of organized intercultural youth encounters as alternative learning arenas for young people at risk of dropping out of school will strengthen the opportunity for these individuals to experience themselves as learners in new and more positive ways. Offering new learning contexts and social relationships can prevent young people from cementing their identities as school dropouts or marginalized youth (Holland &

Leander, 2004). Providing young people with opportunities to utilise resources that they do not normally encounter in formal school settings will enable them to re-imagine themselves as learners. In the end, this will have a positive effect on other areas such as education and work and will support increased social integration. In order to succeed in this work, it is essential to strengthen the status of non-formal education within educational research in general and, even more importantly, provide and facilitate learning experiences valid in school across various contexts.



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