"It Gave Me a New Insight!" Some Perspectives from Students in an International Course

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Abstract   This article is based on a survey of an international class, covering a period of 8 years, each class consisting of 24-32 students form 12-16 different countries, mainly Europe, but also including some Asians, Africans and Americans. Through the course, the students are confronted with their own attitudes, exploring how they react to prejudices and biases. We focus on the concepts of multicultural identity and multicultural competence, challenging the students to express their own perspectives both on their own culture as well and on others, and how this affects their identity. The course also focuses on culture and worldview, as well as the identity-construction of children in a multicultural setting. The students also discuss their views on global challenges, and their own role in the future society. The survey, which is both quantitative and qualitative, therefore includes both cognitive as well as emotive elements, and is partly descriptive and partly analytical. We challenge the students to express how their attitudes, values, and convictions have been influenced by the course. The main issues mentioned are discussed in relation to theory, both the required readings of the course, as well as supplementary literature in the multicultural field.

Keywords   Cultural Awareness, Multicultural Identity, Multicultural Competence, Intercultural Communication, and Worldview

1. Introduction

Why do students travel abroad for exchange-courses? Is it mainly for adventure? How do they react to the new environment, to the international setting? How do they respond to the topics of the course? We address some of these issues, basing this article on an extensive questionnaire to the first 6 classes of a course on multicultural issues (hereafter called MCI) in Oslo, Norway, from 2005 to 2010, supplemented by interviews from the classes of 2011 and 2012. The responses are treated in the framework of the course-curriculum. We challenge the students to express how their attitudes, values, and convictions have been influenced by the course. The main issues mentioned are discussed in relation to theory, both the required readings of the course, as well as supplementary literature of the multicultural field in general.

1.1. The MCI-course

The MCI-course, called "Multicultural Identity in a Global World", is a one-term course of 30 ECTS credits. The classes have varied from 24 to 32 students from 12-16 different countries, mainly Europe, including the Eastern part, but also 2-5 students in each class from other parts of the world, as well as a few national students. The MCI-students in the period of 2005-2012 total 215, and have come from 36 countries.

The reasons for joining the course are quite varied. Some of the students focus on the content of the course, the main concepts of culture and identity. They are concerned with how they can make a positive contribution in the multicultural society, how they can make a difference for children growing up in today's globalized world. Some have searched for such a course, others were looking for an opportunity to go abroad, for the adventure itself, and for making new international friends. Most of the students have received the Erasmus-scholarship and are quite privileged, being able to go abroad and experience something exotic that they otherwise could not afford. Those outside the Erasmus-support, have usually been attracted by the content of the course itself.

There are two main focal concepts of the course, that of "culture" and "identity", both with reference to childhood and education. Some of the sub-themes are cultural awareness, childhood and identity construction, intercultural communication, culture and world-view, culture and ethics, human rights and childhood, processes of globalization, and cross-cultural competence. The first 3 topics had the highest score of being "most interesting" among the students. The cultural background of each participant is a vital resource in the discussions, and the city in question, increasingly multicultural, is an important arena for contextualization. The course offers fieldwork in schools and kindergartens, which becomes an important basis for their reports, often in

comparison with experiences from their own background. Most of the students are midway in their teacher education, either for primary school or for kindergarten.

1.2. Encountering a New Culture

The exchange-students are exposed to another climate, other living-conditions, a different student-environment, a different way of organizing higher education, different educational traditions, different relations between teacher and students, and many other things. The first encounter with the city of Oslo can furthermore be quite exotic, this cold winter-land, which fascinates many. Norwegians in general seem friendly, yet they keep a certain distance. Many of the students have received initial practical help from a local student, but rather few seem to develop close relations with local students during their stay. Actually, that is one of the points of regret mentioned by some upon their departure.

In their fieldwork, the MCI-students visit schools and kindergartens also in parts of the city where there are large concentrations of immigrants. Some of these areas seem rather isolated, with people living in ghettos. It may be surprising for some to hear about immigrant-wives who have hardly been outside their house for years, and can hardly speak the national language. Some of the MCI-students are acquainted with such cases from their own home-country, like the Germans and the Dutch, while for those from East-Europe this may be a new experience, since their immigrant population is still rather limited. The exposure to the local multicultural environment is therefore a surprise for many, unexpected in a Nordic country.

1.3. Encountering the Nordic University-culture.

The students come from very different academic environments. Some are used to a rather free life-style as students, others more structured, where attendance, regular feedback, and assignments are expected. The MCI-course requires regular attendance, trying to create an atmosphere of trust and good relations, and most of the students accept the academic pressure, with regard to the required readings, reports and exam. For some, report-writing where they are expected to combine theoretical knowledge with a discussion of the topic, also including their personal reflections, is a totally new experience. Many are used to referring directly to theory, writing a chapter-résumé, but not to discussions and reflections, drawing on a variety of viewpoints. The Germans and the Dutch seem closest to this Nordic academic tradition, as well as the Czechs from among the East- and Central-Europeans.

Furthermore, the relationship between teacher and student may also be surprising. The teachers they encountered at the university are seen almost as friends, whom they easily may ask for guidance, calling them by their first name, something considered quite unusual. Being together with their teachers on excursions and even invited home, is a totally new experience. True, the teachers of MCI

do consider this class somewhat different from other classes, and try to be helpful towards students far away from home.

2. Materials and Methods

Of all the 158 students who attended the MCI-course during the period of 2005-2010, 129 (82%) responded to the 66 questions, of which 10 were open-spaced for personal comments. Later, 3 students from each class were chosen for an in-depth qualitative survey, with 20 open questions. See [30] and samples below.

The questionnaire asked for feedback on both structure of the course, practical issues, topics treated, teaching methods, class-management, relations to teachers and fellow-students, the requirements, the form of the exams, their own input, the relevance of the course for themselves, and finally, how the course had any influence on their attitudes toward other cultures. The students for the qualitative survey were chosen both to give a broad range of countries as well as diverse educational background. The total material is therefore partially quantitative and partially qualitative, however, this article is mainly based on the open questions in the questionnaire and on the in-depth survey of the selected students, as these questions more specifically relates to our present research question. The questionnaire was at the outset meant primarily as an evaluation of the course itself, but turned out to include much more, as the open-ended questions and interviews gave the students an opportunity to verbalize how their attitudes and values in relation to multicultural issues had been influenced by the course. Statistical material is therefore left at a minimum. Methodological and ethical aspects are treated in line with Kvale and Brinkmann's [36] principles, and the interviews, including those from the classes of 2011 and 2012, have focused on the understanding of concepts rather than of facts and practical issues, as well as having observed also the main elements of discursive interviews [36] chaps. 4 and 8 (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson [29]).

Here are a few samples from the quantitative questionnaire, some open-ended, but mostly being statements put forward, with an answering scale of *totally agree / partially agree / partially disagree / totally disagree / don't know,* [30] p.108.

4. The MCI-course was well-balanced with periods of lectures, fieldwork, and report-writing.

8. Any comments to the MCI Syllabus and Curriculum?

11. I am used to writing reports like the Final report, including theory, practical empirical data and personal reflections.

19. Any comments to the Reports and Oral Exam?

20. My own culture presentation: It made me think again about my own culture, about my own identity.

22. The other culture presentations: I learned a lot about their culture that I didn't know, about their cultural identity.

25. Five most interesting topics we had in the Syllabus?

26. The class-sessions had a good balance between lectures

and discussions.

28. I learn more from discussions than from lectures.

31. I made active use of teacher guidance outside of class.

32. It was easy to call on the teacher(s) for advice.

34. I found the MCI-course relevant for my future work/studies.

36. What competencies do you think you acquired through the MCI-course?

63. Do you have some suggestions for Improvements of the MCI-course? Comment both on topics as well as structure.

64. Any special memories from your stay in Oslo? Any special experiences? Positive or Negative? Describe.

65. What are some of the most valuable experiences from your period of study in Oslo? Try to single out a few.

The qualitative questionnaire [30] p.112, is more in-depth, all 20 questions are listed:

1. Why did you apply to the MCI-course? How did you get to know about our course?

2. What was it that caught your attention? What seemed interesting?

3. What was your impression from the other students about their intention of joining the course? (Subject-interest? Excitement of going abroad? Wanting a change in life?...)

4. Was it easy to mingle with the other students? Did you make friends?

5. If so, has the friendship lasted?

6. How did you experience the relationship between teacher and student? Examples?

7. Was the educational situation very different from your home-institution? In what way?

8. Was the academic pressure too hard, too soft, or just right, for such an exchange course? Comments?

9. Did the MCI give you any new insights? Any surprises?

10. What did you appreciate most?

11. What did you not appreciate?

12. How did the MCI affect your own sense of personal and/or cultural identity? In what way?

13. Did the MCI relate or communicate any particular values? Cultural? Ethical?

14. Please give your own definition of "Multicultural Competence".

15. Do you consider yourself a person with multicultural competence today? What kind of competence do you feel you have acquired?

16. Do you consider Multicultural Competence to be important in today's world? Why? Why not?

17. Do you work today in some field where you can make use of this competence?

18. What challenges are most urgent in our globalized world today?

19. What can you do to meet these challenges?

20. What are your dreams for the future? Work? Personal?

In addition to these questionnaires, the article also incorporates impressions from class-work and on-going communication with the students during their 4 month period of study. Thus, the author is also a participant observer to the process as the curriculum of the course becomes a natural outline for most of the topics for discussion (Hammersley & Atkinson [29] chaps 4 and 5).

The present article is therefore partly descriptive of the MCI-course, but primarily analytical of the topics treated in light of the responses from the students. Some introductory questions have already been mentioned, but our main point of research is as follows:

"How are the attitudes, values and convictions of exchange-students influenced by their attendance in an international course, as they relate to the multicultural issues treated?"

3. Findings and Topics for Discussion.

We will single out some of the topics most visible and commented on by the students, held together with the main themes of the MCI-course. Several student-quotations are added as illustrations.

3.1. Culture-Shock?

As the MCI-course progresses, the topic of Culture-shock appears in the Syllabus. The students usually recognize their own reactions in the material being covered, by Bennett [9], Samovar [46], and Spencer-Oatey & Franklin [50]. A period abroad often starts with a strong expectation, underlined by the first experience of fascination, sometimes described as the "fun-experience", or the "tourist-phase". It could be the excursions to the snow-covered parks, or a trip up to the nearby ski-jump, or just travelling to the university on crammed busses and tramcars, and having to conquer the hurdles of snow-banks. It could be the experience of the darkness of winter, as both strange, mystical, and perhaps attractive.

The MCI-students are neither immigrants, nor exchange-students who go abroad for a lengthy specialized study of 2-4 years, called "sojourners" by Ward [52] chap.7 (cf. Bochner, in Sam & Berry [45] chap.12). They are abroad merely for 3 or 4 months, and yet they recognize some of the reactions mentioned. The MCI-course encourages the students to get beyond the tourist-phase, and make an effort of going deeper into the society they have come to. The temptation of lingering in a phase of little or no obligation is reinforced by the fact that they socialize primarily with other international students. However, even with the brief stay of the MCI-students, they experience that the stages of adjustment mentioned are relevant also for their situation. As the first stage of "fun" passes, followed by some frustrations and disappointments, they seem to move ahead trying to take in new stimuli. They become more eager to go deeper into the new society, finding their own style of combining their own values with the new values they encounter. Some of the students are able to distinguish between the emotive aspect of the encounter and the cognitive aspects, resulting from a

more in-depth cultural study of their new host-country (cf. Berry [11]). However, many student-responses merely relate psychological reactions, without digging into the knowledge acquired in the theoretical material of the course. For some students the culture-shock experience merely becomes an expression of frustration towards regulations and attitudes their encounter in the host-country. Yet, most of them end up with a more balanced attitude toward the new society, and may experience a movement from "accommodating" to rules and regulations, to "adjusting" one's own attitudes and behavior, and finally, gradually "adapting" some of the values and attitudes of the new society.

3.2. The Matter of Subject Knowledge

Some of the students have previously studied communication and international topics, but most of them come only with a general knowledge and impression of what a multicultural society is, and what the globalized world leads to of consequences for individuals and societies.

Many of the students show keen interest for the topics of communication, both verbal and non-verbal, and often choose these topics for their reports. Language is interesting and challenging, and the students feel at home in this topic, having experienced many misunderstandings due to strange sentence-structures, wrong use of the negation-particle, and unfamiliar slang-expressions. Likewise, there are challenges in interpreting body-language, gestures, facial expressions, eye-contact, bodily contact, and interpretation of smile and laughter (cf. Bowe & Martin [12]). The students can come up with innumerable amusing examples.

The MCI-students consider communication also to be a most relevant topic for their future work in a multicultural society, in school or kindergarten. They become aware of their own so-called "culture-filter", as in Dahl [15], which often influences one's interpretation of the behavior of others. Communication and culture-filter therefore become entrance-gates to the other topics. On the other hand, it is fair to say that the notion of deconstructing culture as a mere product of intercultural communication, as in Piller [42] p.16, was hardly an aspect present among many of the students, nor was it a major focus in the course, although briefly treated.

Naturally, the MCI-course has a focus on globalization, with the many implications this has for both society at large and for each individual. The students are exposed to the classic passages from Anthony Giddens [24], and many other sources such as Ansell [2], Arnove & Torres [3], and Ritzer [44]. The ethical perspectives are also implicit in many parts of the course, and explicitly treated in the topics of "Culture and Ethical Challenges", and "Social commitment in a Global World". The social and political consciousness among the MCI-students obviously varies. Some are much concerned with issues such as climate and environment, others about immigration and integration, third-world issues, youth and drugs, and many more. Several of the students were active members of organizations

working with these issues, and some of their responses to the challenges in the globalized world are illustrating:

S-07 (Student of 2007-class): "Distribution of the wealth (social justice) is the most critical aspect of our globalized world.there is a great need of global social justice".

S-10: "Harmony and respect for all human and non-human individuals beyond any cultural, economic, socio-political and religious boundaries...the deep insight of multiculturalism, and how it affects at individual, social and state level, as well as the global human society".

3.3. Perception of Culture

There are many definitions of culture. Clifford Geertz [23] p.89, describes culture as *"a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life"*. Crucial expressions here are "inherited conceptions" and "perpetuate and develop", combining both the unchanging aspect, often derogatory called essentialism, with the dynamic and always evolving element. This dialectic is also underlined by Hofstede [31] p.10 *"Culture is to a human collective what personality is to an individual"*. Samovar [46] p.22 adds that *"Culture is a way of organizing the world, offering a group-worldview, a framework, allowing the members to make sense of themselves and of the world"*. Culture teaches the child how to behave in an acceptable way, and protects people from the unknown, and covers according to Hofstede the main elements found in all cultures, such as history, religion, values, social organization, and language.

Several of the MCI-students recognize also the main patterns of cultural diversity found in Hofstede's research [31], such as individuality versus collectivity, the feminine versus the masculine, the distance to the power elite, the relation to predictability, called "uncertainty avoidance", as well as the long-term or short-term planning in life. This analysis has given reason for the students to focus with fresh eyes on the values of their own culture, often in a critical way. It would also be fitting to refer to Kluckhorn and Strodtbeck's analysis [35], with their focus on "value-orientation", claiming that everybody turn to their cultures for answers to the fundamental questions, concerning human nature, nature, time, activity, and behavior.

Lastly, we will refer to the well-known survey of Edward Hall [28] concerning the context for the communication with our fellow-men, expressed in his "high context, low context" dialectic. Hall's tables also causes recognition among the MCI-students, although most of them having been oblivious of this distinction previously. Although we may point to elements that can characterize cultures, it seems crucial, with Luckmann [37] p.22, to underline the fact that *"although culture provides strength and stability, it is never static. Cultural groups face continual challenges from such powerful forces as environmental upheaval, plagues, wars, migration, the influx*

of immigrants, and the growth of new technologies. As a result, cultures change and evolve over time".

Present trends to disassociate culture from national or ethnic connotations, such as Holliday [32], Piller [42], Parekh [41], May [39], and Scollon [47], focusing rather on characteristic traits of human behavior and interest crossing borders, are present among some of our students, but only to a certain degree. On the contrary, national and ethnic peculiarities seem to catch the attention of the students, not the least to see their own culture both as unique and in a broader geographic context, for example that of Europe (Burgess [13]). Many students protest the notion that this is a prejudice, or "neo-essentialism" or "chauvinism", as in Piller [42] p.15, and are a bit surprised that there should be a contradiction between Hofstede's categories on the one hand, and the more trendy expression of "global cosmopolitanism" on the other, as in Holliday [32] p.11. May not the two be interrelated and complementary? This question is related to elements in the debate on "Acculturation", focusing on both the psychological aspects as well as the variety of perception within the concept of acculturation, as by Sam & Berry [45]. The MCI-course gives space to such a discussion, also that of critical multiculturalism, as in May [39] and Baumann [7].

The MCI-students are required to present their own culture to the class, which is to a large degree delivered within a national and ethnic framework. They find it interesting to listen to what their peer-students have to say about their own culture (89% in the questionnaire), but it's also challenging to think through what values in their own culture they would like to relate to the class (90%), where the critical aspect may vary to a large degree.

S-05: "I understood that behind a behavior there is a complex system of symbols, meanings, both personal and cultural. Identity and need for identity is flexible and changing and very often the differences are in the level of form not in concept".

S-07: "Since I have been brought up within three completely different cultures, it gave me an exceptional insight to understand many things about myself better…When I 'flex' between different cultures, I am now much more aware of my own behavior".

3.4. Adjusting Prejudices

In the first class-session of the MCI-course, the students are confronted with stereotypes and prejudices, in the topics of "Cultural Identity" and "Cultural Awareness". The students have barely become acquainted with each-other and are now challenged to write down: (1) some issues or concepts that make up your cultural identity, (2) how you think other people view your culture/nation, and (3) what stereotypes/biases/prejudices you yourself have toward others, North-Americans / Latin-Americans / Europeans / Africans / Asians, like those nations and cultures represented in the class. Sometimes, this exercise starts with a great degree of caution, so as not to offend any of the newly

acquired friends, already on the first day. However, usually someone breaks the ice with a direct characteristic of another country, and others follow suit. It could be how Southern Europeans view the Germans, the Northern Europeans toward the Italians, the English toward the French or vice versa, but probably the most common one is the attitude of many Europeans toward the Americans, with strong stereotypes. Several of the students are willing to be quite frank about their prejudices, and even if this exercise is somewhat sensitive, it ends in a friendly and pleasant atmosphere.

This focus on stereotypes and prejudices is dealt with in many of the different sections of the MCI-course, both in the sociological parts on anti-racism and globalization, as by Donnelly [17] and Giddens [24] (cf. Beck [8], Steger [51]), and within the topics on culture and religion, especially by McGuire [40], Sam & Berry [45], and Woodhead [53], as well as the pedagogical topics of identity-construction, as related by Gundara [27], Kjørholt [34], and Skeie [48] (cf. Banks [6]). The students are also much concerned about this issue during their fieldwork in kindergartens and schools. They are reminded that knowledge and education is the key to liberate oneself from prejudices, as expressed by the renown psychiatrist and Holocaust-survivor Leo Eitinger [20] p.67 (my translation): *"What you don't know, you easily become afraid of. What you become afraid of, you tend to dislike. What you don't like, you easily attack".*

Stereotypes can often be complicated. You sometimes see what you want to see, or as Gudykunst [26] p.140 expresses it: *"Stereotypes can create self-fulfilling prophecies. Individuals tend to see behavior that confirms their expectations, even when it is absent".* To discover such mechanisms is vital, and also part of the objective of the MC-course. Several of the students gave feedback to that effect. It was frightening to discover that stereotypes so easily colored one's attitudes, but also liberating to become aware of this process (cf. Piller [42] chaps.5 & 7).

Some of the MCI-students confirm in class-discussions that certain elements of the stereotypes against their own country are legitimate, and that they wish things were different. Some are even shameful on behalf of their own country, of what their leaders can say and do in public, or what kind of extreme political groups are very much alive and spreading their propaganda, or they are disappointed at the backward policies of education. Therefore with increased knowledge and awareness of stereotypes in general, the students usually become more critical of issues in their home-country, issues they didn't feel strongly about previously. For some, it was also an eye-opener for several positive aspects of their own culture.

S-06: "It was interesting to be in such an international class, where almost everybody was very proud of their countries and it did make me reflect on my own national identity and my relationship with it", referring to herself as a Third Culture Kid, an expression from Pollock & Van Reken [43].

S-08: "As a result of my work, I try and advocate for

refugees and migrants whenever I face prejudice, when I feel I can say something in the situation, and...make people stop". S-10: "I guess what surprised me is that there still are so many stereotypes in the world and that even people my age, even fellow MCI-students, who have unlimited access to information and live in a free world, consider them as the truth".

3.5. Developing "Multicultural Competence"

The MCI-course has an expressed goal that the students should develop a so-called "multicultural competence", often treated synonymous with "intercultural competence". The Norwegian anthropologist Øyvind Dahl [15] defines intercultural competence as consisting of a communicative component (behavior), a cognitive component (knowledge), and an affective component (attitudes and emotions). Dahl maintains that intercultural competence is *"the ability to communicate adequately and properly in a given situation in relation to people with other cultural conditions"* p.203 (my translation). Spencer-Oatey and Franklin [50] uses the term "intercultural interaction competence", ICIC, which is meant *"to handle also the psychological demands and dynamic outcomes that result from such interchanges"* p.51.

We may discern both similarities and some nuances when comparing with other descriptions of "multicultural competence". Samovar claims that the following components are indispensable [46] p.385:
1. Motivation, a sincere wish to develop personal relations across traditional cultural borders.
2. Knowledge, of communication, cultural traits, norms/rules, language, procedures etc.
3. Skills, the ability to listen, observe, analyze, integrate, and employ in different situations.
4. Sensitivity, to be flexible, patient, empathetic, curios, open for diversity, develop "allophilia".
5. Character, that of trustworthiness and integrity, not treating people discriminately, showing goodwill toward others (similar descriptions in Scollon [47] p.134).

These five elements distinguish between the personal qualities of the individual. We maintain that intercultural competence deals primarily with the communication process itself, while multicultural competence focuses on the qualities necessary to live and prosper in a multicultural society. The MCI-course seeks to enhance the multicultural competence in each student, 75,4% answers affirmative to a high degree of achieving this goal, and 80,2% find this competence highly relevant for their future work or studies. They are challenged to define this concept, and respond as follows:
S-06: "[Multicultural competence is] the ability to accept diverse cultures…It means having the skills to interact with people from other cultures. In addition, it includes an understanding that no culture is superior or better than the other (every culture is unique)".
S-09 develops more broadly: "I would think of this in terms of open-mindedness, generosity and having a

'world-vision'…remembering that 'our' way is not the only way, or even the 'right' way, requires persistence and effort!", underlining that multicultural competence is challenging and demanding.
S-11: "It's an acceptance that many people live differently than I do, and that I don´t need to adapt to their values, ethics, or biases, but I need to be able to respect their differences and be able to live and work together in harmony. I consider myself a bit more multi-culturally competent now than I did before the MCI-course".

When asked what kind of competence the MCI-course gave them, we find the following responses in the questionnaire:
- An awareness of how important culture is concerning my own identity and worldview,
- Sensitivity towards others, an increased knowledge of other cultures,
- Coping strategies with regard to culture shock and stress experiences,
- Learning to accept the value-systems found in other cultures,
- Critical reasoning when meeting people from other cultures,
- Mediating between cultures, and understanding backgrounds.

The three key terms most frequently mentioned are: knowledge, understanding and sensitivity. These responses also express a sense of belonging to a multicultural group, much in line with what Parekh [41] p.341 calls a "mediating membership of a shared community" (cf. Spencer-Oatey & Franklin [50] chaps.8-9, and Bennett & Bennett [10]).

3.6. Understanding of "Multiculturalism"

The MCI-students encounter cultural diversity in their own class. With students from 12-16 different nations, and only 2-3 who have English as their mother-tongue, it becomes a challenge of communication for almost all. They experience that not only do words have different nuances, but that there are many codes not expressed in words. However, in spite of these differences, they gradually experience a genuine unity, something that binds them together. To put it with Adler [1] p.227: *"The multicultural person is intellectually and emotionally committed to the basic unity of all human beings while at the same time recognizing, legitimizing, accepting, and appreciating the differences that exist between people of different cultures"*. Adler is operating on the boundary between underlining the cultural identity on the one hand, and overriding the cultural borders on the other. He claims that we have a new current of human interaction, leading to an erosion of old cultural barriers. In this process we discover the so-called "universal person", who does not eliminate the cultural differences, but tries to retain that which is important and valuable in each culture, leading to an enrichment of society. The universal person is open to changes and variation, and lives so to speak "on the boundary" (cf. Parekh [41] chaps.5 &11). According to Adler the multi-culturally competent person is in

"continual personal transitions", is *"psycho-culturally adaptive"*, and *"maintains indefinite boundaries of the self"* [1] p.234ff.

The crucial point is whether one can hold on to such a perception of multiculturalism, that of a fundamental unity and at the same time underlining one's own cultural identity. Both Samovar and Adler retain this connection as vital, and Adler expresses it very explicitly, p.236:
1) Every culture has its own integral coherence, integrity, and logic, giving meaning and significance to both individual and collective identity.
2) No one culture is inherently better or worse than another, but is equally valid as expressions of variation in human experience.
3) All persons are to a certain extent, culturally bound, having a sense of what regulates our behavior, and of what signifies our personal belonging. Adler thereby tries to balance the "universal person" against the culturally conscious person, claiming both aspects as important for the multicultural individual (cf. Holliday [32]). The similar dialectic is treated by Berry in his Acculturation strategies, contrasting multiculturalism as means of integration, with the so-called "Melting Pot" expressing assimilation, in Sam & Berry [45] p.33ff.

Some of the MCI-students found both Berry's and Adler's points applicable to themselves, that they felt bound together across national borders, while at the same time retaining a bit of their original national or cultural characteristics. For some the balance-point would tip in favor of the "universal person", while for others their national identity would dominate, and still others did not see much value of such a combination. However, all were challenged to think through their own conception of culture, and in particular in what way they were bound to their own cultural background. Some comments are illustrating:
S-06: "Yes, it's very important to be culturally aware and respectful of people's beliefs and habits, and reflective of your own. At the same time, there are certain universal norms, for instance the human rights act, which is necessary to observe...it's an awareness of the ways lives are lived in the wider world and of views other than your own".
S-08: "I believe that most of the students in the course had very strong ethical and cultural values when they joined the course, as did I. The MCI-course made them stronger".
S-10: "people are so globalized today that without a multicultural competence one will have a hard time to understand and interact in human society in a better way".

3.7. Perspectives on One's Own Culture and Identity

The MCI-students are asked to present their own culture in the class, focusing primarily on "culture" and "education". They often end up with presenting traditional cultural values from history, art, folk-lore, and food, also focusing on the language, one's own hometown, local and national festivals. Some are proud of this, while others feel a

bit more ambivalent. It may seem surprising that for many of these young people items such as language, ancestry, hometown, and ethnicity are among the most important topics of their identity. This is in line with how M. Fong [21] p.6 defines cultural identity, as *"the identification of communications of a shared system of symbolic verbal and nonverbal behavior that are meaningful to group members who have a sense of belonging and who share traditions, heritage, language, and similar norms of appropriate behavior. Cultural identity is a social construction"*.

The students found themselves in a strange double-role, both as an accuser of issues in their home-country that they did not approve of, as well as a defender towards criticism from the outside. They wanted to distance themselves from a narrow ethnocentric and nationalistic profile, rather wanting to present themselves as internationalists, as presented by Piller [42] chap.5. This dichotomy was problematic for quite a few.

The relationship between culture and education also becomes quite evident. It relates to how educational institutions are concerned with history, with national values, with its own role in the international picture, with the integration-debate, with economic and social issues, and separation of classes. It becomes evident that also educational systems are indeed culturally dependent and have roots that cannot be overlooked, well underlined by Sonia Nieto in May [39] chap.8, and in Banks [6] chap.5. Why is it natural in some countries to have religious symbols in the classroom, such as in Italy, while it is unthinkable in others? Why is the national flag used frequently in some countries, while very seldom in others? Some of the students, especially those from Southern Europe, are very critical of the ruling political establishment in their home-countries, they would rather identify with protest-movements, with humanistic and international ideals. Through the MCI-course the students become even more aware of this dilemma, and even though it may be a kind of adventure-trip, they discover deeper aspects of other cultures through their personal contacts in the course. Some of the students comment on their cultural identity:
S-08: "I was born in a mixed family so I always had contact with different cultures simultaneously, but never with so many at once. I believe that the MCI-course made me more conscious both of my personal and cultural identity as well as of my 'global' identity".
S-05: "I have always hated my country, but when I felt down, maybe missing friends or family, I discovered how I loved some 'normal' [home country] attitudes".

3.8. Culture and Worldview, Culture and Religion

These topics are treated in the MCI-course, under such sub-headings as "The Deep Structures of Culture", and "Worldview: Cultural Explanations of Life and Death". Dana [16] p.9 maintains that *"worldview is imposed by collective wisdom as a basis for sanctioned actions that*

enable survival and adaptation", and Samovar [46] p.98, holds that *"worldview is at the core of human behaviour since it helps define perceptions of reality and instructs the individual on how to function effectively within their perceived reality"*. Thus, the worldview helps people to make sense out of reality, and is an overarching set of values, which most people within a culture adhere to.

The MCI-students have various attitudes toward religion. Some are secularized and have only a distant notion of religious values, as some of the Nordic or German students. Others are brought up in strong religious traditions in their previous schooling, such as some of the Dutch and Belgian students. Still others are brought up in a society where the religious establishment in a way controls the society, and causes the students to react against that kind of religious guardianship. This can be true of the Spanish or Italian students. Still others are brought up in a society which for half a century has been characterized by the atheistic values of the state, but where people now again may freely engage in religious activities, such as in Hungary, the Czech Republic, and the Baltics. For this last group it becomes almost a paradox that in the previous Christian Western Europe, the religious values have become almost invisible.

A definition of religion is appropriate at this point, *"Religion can be understood as a system of conceptions of faith, which gives direction and content to the thinking of the individuals, their way of evaluation and action",* Dahl [15] p.132 (my translation). We distinguish some of the elements that all science of religion must have in mind, as expressed in Ninian Smart's 7 Dimensions of religion [49]: the dogmatic, ethic, mythical, rituals, experiences, social, and material dimension. These dimensions give meaning to the MCI-students, as verbalized in class-discussions. Their fragmented impressions of the place of religion in society becomes clearer, and so does their own relation to religion, seeing which elements of religion that are meaningful to them. The substantive definition given by Spiro is provocative for some, while for others clarifying, that a religion is *"an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings",* as in McGuire [40] p.9. This implies that all aspects of religion are culturally dependent and determined, both as to human relations as well as the transcendent aspect of it, thoroughly treated also by Woodhead [53] chaps 1, 12, 16, 17, and 21.

Adhering to McGuire's approach, one does not primarily ask what the religion teaches, but what religion *does* for the individual. Religion expounds the unknown, personifies the ideals, integrates culture, legitimates the social system and interprets human existence. As religion for many brings meaning into their experiences, people will therefore choose meaning from a greater system, from a worldview. Meaning becomes acquired. Clifford Geertz [22] holds to a functional perception of religion, and sees religion as *"a template for meaning, [which] not only interprets reality but also shapes it"* p.40, and that *"people interpret events and experiences as meaningful by linking them with a*

larger sense of order" p.12.

McGuire [40], referring to Berger, claims that a system of meaning demands a "social basis", a "plausibility structure", that will give social support to its members. That gives a strong sense of belonging for the majority, and likewise a strong desire among minorities to mark their own belonging, sometimes legitimizing the creation of ghettos, or cultural and ethnic enclaves, where the religious belonging, a kind of "collective representation", becomes a vital characteristic trait. Many MCI-students on their daily trip to the university through some parts of the city, claim to see such enclaves, a kind of visible "social basis", especially around the mosques in the area.

The discussions in the MCI-class will therefore often deal with the place of religion within the scope of cultural identity. For some, this is less important, while for others, quite fundamental. Many will discover, without regard of their own personal attitudes and experiences, that their own culture is highly influenced by religion, be it in language, symbols, different rituals, structures, and not the least, in art. They realize that religion often legitimates and justifies social actions. Religion has a place in all societies, as a kind of collective representation, sometimes very visible, at other times more behind the scene. Some MCI-students comment on these issues, primarily in relation to values.

S-09: "[The MCI-course] provided me a means to understand my own cultural values in a theoretical framework. Also, it boosted my ethical values by helping me being more tolerant to other cultures, respecting the dignity of each culture".

S-11: "The MCI-course helped me redefine my own world-view, and my values".

S-12: "In my work as a kindergarten teacher, as a parent and a friend, I think it is important to further pass on values, such as was discussed in the course, and to act by them".

3.9. Children and Identity. Challenges in the Multicultural Kindergarten/school

An important topic in the MCI-course is "Childhood and Identity Construction", where articles such as Kjørholt "The Participating Child" [34], and Jans "Children as citizens" [33] are in focus. The principle of children's participation is fundamental in Nordic pedagogy, and even though this aspect is not unknown in other European countries, the impact seems less obvious. What is the content of "the competent child"? What do we mean by saying that a child is a resource or subject? In what way is democracy being taught and practiced in the kindergarten? Such questions are raised and discussed in the MCI-course, and it is surprising to many of the students that children's perspectives are given such weight. This is thoroughly treated by Berit Bae [4], as in her article "Qualitative Aspects of Dialogue between Children and Adults in Pre-school Institutions". Similarly, Eide and Winger [18] focus on the reciprocity in the communication between adults and children in their research on interviewing children (see also

Broström, chap.9 in Einarsdottir [19]; cf. Christensen & James [14]). Here we encounter some of the most characteristic elements of Nordic Early Childhood pedagogy, which many of the MCI-students find both surprising and interesting, not the least when related to the multicultural kindergartens and schools they become acquainted with.

During their fieldwork-period, the MCI-students have had their practice in kindergartens and schools in different parts of the city, with quite diverse cultural profiles. Students from Eastern Europe have often little experience with multicultural groups of children, and of integration-issues. Even students from the Netherlands and Germany, who actually have large immigrant groups, are somewhat surprised that so many ethnic groups and languages are present in the same school or kindergarten, even in the same classes. They are more used to seeing the different ethnic groups clustered in different parts of the big cities, and therefore belonging to different schools.

Some of the students have come with the impression that Scandinavia has solved the problem of "inclusion" or integration, and are keen on seeing how this functions in practice. However, they are sometimes disappointed, when they see and hear about problems in the local schools. Some teachers they have interviewed, are frustrated and complain about lack of resources for assistants in the classes needed for individual children or groups of children, including those who lack sufficient language skills (cf. Banks [6] parts 1, 4 &7, and Baker [5] chaps.17-19). The "inclusion" seems far from perfect.

Other MCI-students who didn't have the same expectations, are often quite impressed to see that the classes are fairly well integrated. They see classes with fewer children per adult than they are used to, and even sometimes an assistant for only one particular child, which would never happen in their home-country. They also sometimes meet mother-tongue-assistants, especially in the kindergartens, and realize that they can be of valuable help for some of the children. They find that integration may function, although at different levels. One student-reaction focusing on children's participation is illustrating:

S-09: "My view about children and raising them up is a bit altered. Here (especially in the kindergartens) they let the children do their own thing. In my country we are more anxiously focused on the children, we tell them not to climb on the swings, because they can fall. Here, I saw that they let the children go, so that they can find their own borders...In my country we also have more discussions and little fights between religions and nationalities. I think the people here are more relaxed to each other and respect each other".

4. Concluding Remarks

When asked about the most valuable experiences resulting from this period abroad, the most prevalent answers are: lasting cross-cultural friendships, becoming more self-confident and independent, and having been able to adapt to a foreign environment. The MCI-course had furthermore inspired some of the students to do further studies in related areas, such as Education, Social-anthropology, or Child Care, and some went on with their PhD-project in these areas. As to their professions, most of the students have gone into teaching in school or kindergarten, many at schools with a multicultural profile, where they can make use of their increased multicultural competence. Others have chosen to do social work in immigrant communities, especially working with youth-groups, creating positive activities as a preventive measure against negative influences.

At the outset we asked why students go on exchange-programs. We also asked how their attitudes, values, and convictions have been influenced through the MCI-course. We have not answered that in full, but we have commented on the relevant issues under each sub-theme in the previous chapter, and discussed the topics in relation to basic theory. As active citizens in a multicultural society, they claim that their level of consciousness related to these issues has been raised, considering themselves as representatives of the new global cosmopolitanism, that Holliday [32] speaks of. Yet, at the same time, they also underline the characteristic traits of their own ethnic or national background. Both perspectives are significant elements of the topics treated in the MCI-course, and are also noted as partial answers to our initial research questions. Many of the MCI-students have a desire "to make a difference". They are genuinely concerned about how they can change the world, in their immediate society, in school and kindergarten, in social work, and youth-institutions. Their responses confirm that they have acquired at least a partial "Multicultural Competence", which they were not very conscious of in advance, but now see as a valuable tool for their coming profession.

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