

Diary-Writing as a Tool for Monitoring and Assessing - Intercultural Learning and Cultural Intelligence

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Abstract

This paper outlines a research project which is being conducted in the educational context of an international Master program: In 2001, an interdisciplinary and cohort-based Master program entitled "International Management and Intercultural Communication/GlobalMBA" was founded, which is currently offered by a four-university consortium that includes the following: Technische Hochschule Köln (TH Köln), Cologne, Germany, the Faculty of Management at the University of Warsaw (UW), Poland, Dongbei University of Finance and Economics (DUFE) in Dalian, China, and the Coggin College of Business at the University of North Florida (UNF) in Jacksonville, USA. During the program's 15-month duration, a multinational cohort of 25-30 students recruited from each of the four universities studies together for one semester at each university. Much of the coursework and assignments as well as the final Master thesis are written in multinational groups of three to four students, thus requiring the students to permanently prove their teamwork skills. Besides, given the in-built mobility and multinational cohort-based structure of the program, the students are continuously exposed to a variety of different cultural experiences and encounters. The program's curriculum includes management-oriented courses as well as courses on the theory and practice of intercultural communication. In one of these latter modules called *Applied Intercultural Communication*, which is taught in every location and has a strong country-specific perspective, students are required to produce reflective diaries describing their cultural experiences. The research project presented here started in 2013 and is based on a qualitative analysis of students' diary entries written during a time span of 15 months as part of the course requirements for this particular module. The project is intended to serve two main purposes:

Keywords: Diary-Writing Tool Monitoring Assessing Intercultural Learning Cultural Intelligence

Introduction

Effective intercultural learning or "cultural localization" requires recognizing, accepting and embracing cultural differences and the inherent diversity which exists in all social interaction. It also means treating individuals as "cultural beings" whose values and behaviours are shaped by the unique culture in which they live. For the students, the diaries are therefore intended as a "learning log" in order to help them gain greater awareness of their own cultural conditioning and values and to critically reflect on the process of cultural adjustment and the experience of travelling and studying within a multinational cohort in four foreign countries. Thus, the diaries represent a dynamic scenario of the students' process of acculturation and localization at various points of their studies. "Cultural localization" is here understood as the practice and process of an individual to accommodate and adjust to cultural differences of both a foreign country and the multinational and socially and ethnically diverse cohort of students.

We, as researchers, educators and program developers, intend to explore how this experience-based approach allows us to chart a student's development and attitudinal shifts from the beginning to the end of a 15-month program, both in terms of personal growth and intercultural learning. We are interested in the question whether, to what extent and in what ways the diaries reveal that intercultural learning and personal development has taken place for the students during the program's duration. The diaries thus are intended to serve as an instrument for monitoring and assessing the process of intercultural proficiency, with a special focus on discovering and assessing which aspects of human experience are *globally shared* and which areas, by contrast, are culturally informed and thus require the students to undergo processes of *cultural*

localization and adaption in order to function adequately in new cultural environments. Put differently: In how far and why do students modify their cultural boundaries, localize and adapt to the culture around them or hold on to their “culture” and surround themselves with the familiar?

Intercultural Competence – a Controversial Concept

The term ‘intercultural competence’ is widely, almost inflationary, used and controversially discussed.¹ It might therefore be helpful to look at some of the many, often conflicting, opinions on that concept as well as at a number of related concepts and underlying questions, such as: What understanding of culture informs Intercultural Communication and therefore the concept of intercultural competence? Where do we draw a line, on a micro-level, between ‘normal’ and ‘intercultural’ communication? What makes Intercultural Communication ‘intercultural’?

According to Lustig/Koester (2005, 64) intercultural competence is the complex of abilities needed to perform *effectively* and *appropriately* when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself. ‘Effectivity’ here refers to the extent to which “desired personal outcomes” (ibid.) have been achieved and therefore usually reflects one’s own view of one’s performance during an intercultural encounter, whereas ‘adequacy’ refers to the way in which one’s actions are perceived by the communicative counterpart and “fit the expectations and demands of the situation” (ibid.). The efficiency-view of intercultural communication has become hugely popular in a business and management context and it very often implies maximizing one’s chances in a global economy and gaining economic or strategic advantages, for example, in negotiations characterized by power differences.² Within an educational context, many of the intercultural competence models follow Michael Byram’s (1997) well-known and widely accepted model of intercultural competence, according to which the learning objectives are grouped into the competencies: factual *knowledge* of social groups and their products and practices (commonly known as “area studies”), *skills* in real-life social interaction and *attitudes*, such as curiosity, openness, empathy and the capacity to become aware of one’s own cultural presuppositions and prejudices. Ideally, a combination of these competencies applied through action then enables learners to achieve harmonious interaction and successful dialogue.

While intercultural competence trainings aim to promote understanding between groups of individuals who are culturally different, they posit cultural difference as the starting point for processing intercultural learning and, in doing so, might fail to recognize specific differences between individuals of any given group. However, such differences can be more relevant than the differences between groups, especially in the case of increasing cultural complexity and diversity within contemporary societies (Welsch 1999, Fang/Faure 2010, Witte 2012). Without intending to deny the importance of cultural difference as a possible starting point for cultural analysis, it might be more appropriate to view any intercultural encounter as situated within a triangle of cultural, personal and social/situation influences that need to be taken into equal consideration. The so-called **Culture-Person-Situation** model draws attention to the fact that misunderstandings may not necessarily be grounded in cultural difference (only), but may, more often than not, be linked to an individual’s experiences, personal dispositions and social situations. As Leenen (2005, 91-92) argues, there are never “purely” cultural encounters as such, because

it’s not cultures that meet, but human individuals who are influenced by a complicated interplay of personal, situational/social and, of course, cultural factors. Therefore a particular difficulty with cultural overlap situations resides in precisely the structural uncertainty as to what the factor ‘culture’ actually means. Generally speaking, one has to assume an interplay between the afore-mentioned factors which cannot easily be decoded. (authors’ translation)

¹ Over more than five decades of academic research into the nature of intercultural competence has produced a “dizzying amount of material” which “can be explained to a great extent by the lack of any unity in the definition of the term ‘intercultural competence’ itself” (Rathje 2007, 255). Much of this research has produced detailed lists of components which are usually broken down into affective, cognitive and behavioral categories. For such lists see, for example, Bolten (2003) and Deardorff (2006).

² Different understandings of the nature and aims of intercultural competence also lead to different perspectives on what kind of competences should be developed. Representatives of the efficiency-view consider intercultural competence as an instrument for achieving economic success. The German intercultural psychologist Alexander Thomas (2003) is one of the most influential proponents of the efficiency concept. While the idea of intercultural effectiveness is more strongly linked to economically oriented applications, more academic and education-based approaches focus on the personal growth and development of the individual. Thus, according to the cooperation-oriented view, intercultural competence is seen as leading to a person’s ethical responsibility and self-reflection as well as creating common ground and a greater understanding between human beings and social groups (Wierlacher 2003).

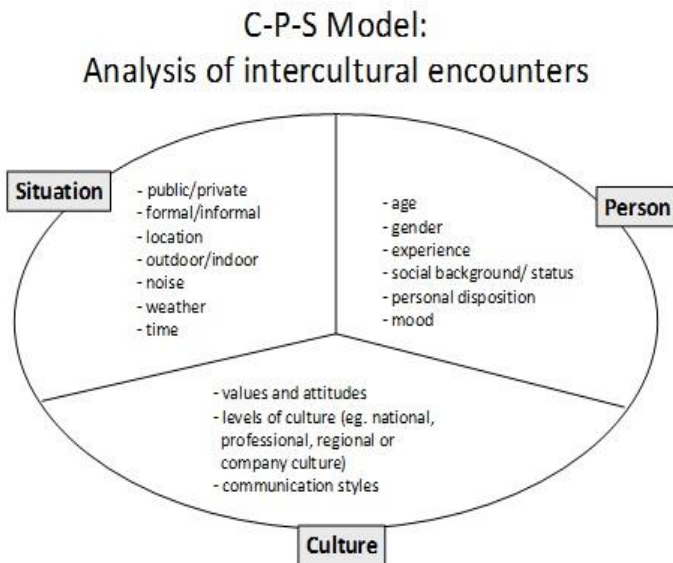


Fig. 1: Adapted according to Leenen 2005, Bosse 2010

The Culture-Person-Situation model, with its special focus on the role of the *situational* and *personal* dimension in encounters, accentuates differentiation within a specific (possibly national) culture and embraces the fundamental complexities within contemporary societies. Context-sensitive approaches to analyzing intercultural encounters are particularly necessary as the development of intercultural competence is largely based on the *individual's* experiences when interacting with members from a different culture – and much here depends on how the term ‘culture’ is understood.

According to the traditional, coherence-based view, cultures are seen as largely homogeneous entities contained within national or ethnic borders, while the dynamic, constructivist process view sees ‘culture’ as a set of values, beliefs and practices shared by members of a social group, leading to a sense of normality and familiarity. German cultural theorist Klaus P. Hansen (2003) has offered a model which is based on the assumption that individuals are no longer primarily part of just one culture, often understood as the membership in a national or ethnic collective, but belong to several collectives at the same time. According to his model of “multicollectivity” (Hansen 2003, 198), cultures exist within human collectives, with the term ‘collective’ including all kinds of groups of individuals – ranging from football clubs to corporate organizations to nation-states – held together by “shared practices” (or “habits” as in Edward B. Tylor’s first anthropological definition of ‘culture’, 1871, 1). In other words, individuals are “doing culture” together within a collective. Hansen does not deny the persistent continuities of nation-states, but in his model they become simply a single, if special, form of a “super-collective” (Hansen 2003, 194). Individuals are able to add collective memberships and cultural customs, even conflicting ones, without having to sacrifice existing ones. The more access individuals have to a wide variety of collectives, the more they will be able to develop familiarity with cultural differences and alternative ways of life.

Based on a definition of ‘culture’ as shared meaning and practices within a collective, any social interaction or communicative situation where at least one of the participants feels a lack of normality and shared meaning (= misunderstanding), could thus be defined as “intercultural”. Such a definition of “intercultural” communication considers the personal interpretations of the participants and limits intercultural communication to situations in which at least one of the participants attribute the problems and conflicts that arise to culture and cultural differences (Piller 2011, 16f). That said, intercultural competence could then be defined as the process of negotiating meaning at the end of which “normality and familiarity” are created (Rathje 2007, 263) – and precisely this process of *negotiating and making meaning* is what we want our students to document and critically reflect on in their diaries.

MA International Management and Intercultural Communication: A Profile

Before outlining our diary-writing project and findings in greater detail, it might be helpful to contextualize the project and provide some information on this Master program. The Master "International Management and Intercultural Communication"/ GlobalMBA is an international postgraduate program, which began in 2001 and is now jointly administered by the afore-mentioned consortium of four different partner universities in Germany, Poland, China and the USA. At TH Köln, two faculties provide this Master program in cooperation – the Faculty of Business, Economics and Law and the Faculty of Information Science and Communication Studies. This inter-faculty cooperation at TH Köln/Germany takes account of the fact that the program integrates and focuses on two fields of action and learning – international management and intercultural competence. The language of instruction is English. Students earn two graduate degrees (a Master of Business Administration awarded by UNF, and a Master of International Management and Intercultural Communication jointly awarded by THK and UW), as well as a certificate of attendance for their study time in China. Each university recruits a maximum of 10 students. With regard to the recruitment process and the related aspect of employability of our future graduates the following is important to mention: This Master aims at qualifying students for all aspects of international management as well as for academic research. The program takes account of the fact that professional international management requires intercultural skills. Therefore the main goal of the program is to enable students to become communicative, creative managers in an international environment and, by applying their intercultural competence, to find solutions at the interface of culture and management. Hence, apart from formal admission requirements, there are certain specific qualities which we are looking for in applicants, which include independent thinking, creativity, curiosity, perceptiveness, the ability to change perspective as well as openness and tolerance. ¹

While cohesive course development is generally of the utmost importance, it is absolutely essential with an integrated and uniquely designed curriculum including modules that are taught in all four locations, as is the case with the module "Applied Intercultural Communication", which provides culture-specific insights into the four countries and cultures involved. Consequently, during an annual Directors Meeting in Cologne in 2012, the program invited all leaders of this particular module to kick-start a discussion on innovative teaching methods, course content and sequencing. Since then, this collaboration has been extended to a research project based on the comparative analysis of diaries written as part of the course requirements for this module in all four locations. ²

Theoretical Background: The Experiential Model of Learning

During the program's duration of 15 months, beginning in Germany, a multinational cohort travels and studies together, spending one study period at each university. Thus, intercultural communication is not only part of the formal education and firmly anchored in the curriculum in the form of intercultural awareness workshops and courses, but *actually lived* and experienced. Quite clearly, such a unique program structure facilitates and promotes experiential learning, i.e. learning through observation and reflection on doing. Experiential learning can be illustrated – and applied to this particular program – by the four-step experiential learning model as developed by David A. Kolb in the 1970s and outlined in Figure 2 below. Following this model, in the concrete experience stage, students are exposed *daily, directly* and *continuously* to difference and a large variety of intercultural encounters. This daily lived experience forms the basis for observation and reflection which takes place in the diaries. Students are asked to collect direct observations, consider what is working or failing (reflective observation) and to think about ways of improving on future intercultural interactions (abstract conceptualization). While experiential learning depends on the students' self-initiative, immersion and active involvement with a concrete experience, the role of the respective module leaders is to facilitate this learning process. Based on the critical incident-technique, we therefore provide the students at the beginning with the following guiding tasks and questions:

Describe in detail an incident and its context which triggered off a misunderstanding or the feeling of uncertainty, alienation, strangeness: Who was involved? What exactly happened? When? Where?

¹ For further information see Mattingly Learch et al. (2016) as well as the program's official website: https://www.th-koeln.de/en/academics/international-management-and-intercultural-communication-masters-program_7182.php

² At the respective universities the following researchers are involved in this project: Ulrike Meyer (OSTr, Technische Hochschule Köln), Prof. Dr. Elke Schuch (Technische Hochschule Köln), Prof. Dr. Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska (Universität Krakau/Warschau), Prof. Dr. Xiaoyan Yu, (Dongbei University of Finance and Economics, Dalian, China), Dr. Steve Paulson (University of North Florida, Jacksonville, USA).

Explain why the experience was critical or significant for you.

The event or incident or experience in itself should be important to you, but what is more important is your reaction to it and how it has influenced and informed your thinking and learning. Describe and reflect your own behavior - what did you do, think and feel at the time? How well or badly did you understand the situation – and deal with it?

How far do you think the incident was caused by cultural factors?

What would you do differently next time?

Has the experience somehow influenced your behavior since the encounter?

Do not only describe the experience, but analyse and evaluate the events and the thinking processes involved. You should aim to consider deeper levels of meaning, exploring moral, ethical and social issues.

The aim of these guiding questions is to make students engage in critical self-assessment and to develop empathy and "the ability to understand other worldviews", which, according to intercultural communication theorists form an important basis of intercultural competence development (Deardorff 2011, 68). Analysis and reflection should finally build the basis for taking action and testing the hypothesis in interaction with others. As a consequence, every future interaction should then be influenced by a cyclical pattern of previous experience, thought and reflection (active experimentation).

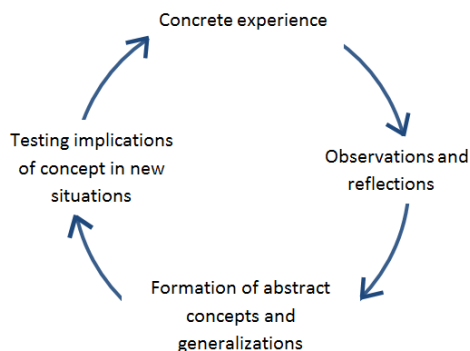


Fig. 2 Kolb's Experiential Model of Learning (EML)

Diary Content Requirements

Content-wise, we ask the students to pay special attention to the following focus fields:

The process of team and cohort building

Our focus of interest: What factors are mentioned as relevant for building a 'cohort spirit'? What kind of problems do arise in the process of building a team and a cohort in general? Who perceives and mentions problems and who does not? Are solutions offered? What kind of solutions are offered? Have they been implemented at some stage during the diary-writing process – and to what effect?

Dealing with criticism, disappointment and conflict

Our focus of interest: Who criticizes whom for what? How is criticism expressed and received? What constitutes sources of dispute?

Moments and feelings of foreignness.

Our focus of interest: Discover what cultural particularities are observed by students, what kind of language is used to describe 'Otherness' and cultural differences (i.e. essentialist/constructivist? etc.).

Assessment

Assessment focuses on how successfully students have demonstrated an ability to analyse and reflect on events in order to learn from them. The account must be of an appropriate level of introspection for reflection on the learning process and demonstrate recognition by the students that their identities are socially constructed. Also relevant to assessment is how much students are able to relate the experience to their current theoretical learning (i.e. intercultural communication concepts and theories). Most importantly, students are asked to be genuine and honest in their reflections and not to write what they think the lecturers might want to hear.

The diary writing ends after the third location (China). In the last location (UNF), students write an analytical account of the learning process (2000-3000 words) based on the diaries, reflecting on their cultural learning and describing the process by which they gained intercultural awareness. Thus, these diary entries should chart a student's development from the beginning to the end of the 15-month program, revealing personal growth and intercultural competence, including both the impact of travelling, living and studying in four countries and the impact of the program with its multinational perspective.

Method of data analysis

This qualitative research is based on reflexive journals. Students submit their diary entries on a monthly basis. They are supposed to write a text of about at least 200 words twice a week and add and comment on one photograph to illustrate their observations. The diary entries are searched for quotations which show the level of their intercultural learning and awareness. The quotations are collected and grouped following the above mentioned research questions and focus fields. In future, it is planned to employ computerized text analysis in order to gain more reliable and efficient insights into how the language used in the diaries allows us to chart the students' intercultural learning process. The following collection of quotations gives a first overview about the learning process and allows for drawing first and preliminary conclusions.

Findings

The following findings are mainly based on the entries of one cohort (Cohort 13, program start in the winter term 2013/14), who have completed the full cycle in all four locations. Therefore only preliminary results are possible. The following examples follow the research questions outlined above.

(1) The process of team and cohort-building

Before the program start in Cologne, students are encouraged to get in touch with each other via email and other forms of social media in order exchange information and arrange for mutual support concerning accommodation and other administrative issues. Moreover, in order to further facilitate the group-building process, the students take part in an initial obligatory 2 day-intercultural workshop which includes an overnight stay in a venue outside Cologne. The workshop is designed to familiarize students with each other and enhance group cohesiveness as well as to make students aware of their own cultural conditioning and how it affects their values, behavior and assumptions about other cultures.

While groups tend to differ in the degree of their sense of commitment and group-feeling, it can generally be stated that there is an up-beat and very relaxed atmosphere at the beginning of the program, a phase of cultural adjustment that Oberg (1960) would refer to as the "honeymoon"-stage. Entries like the following are, consequently, frequent:

I had the sensation that we've all become friends within one week, knowing each other quite well and respecting each other's feelings, cultures and backgrounds. ... Everyone seems to be so open-minded and interested in everyone else ...

One important idea of the multinational cohort-based program structure is that each national group is at one given point host in their own country, while being a visitor /foreigner in the three other countries. This way they learn from each other on the one hand and are prepared to help others on the other hand.

I love the fact that they can learn from us and we will probably learn a lot from them once we are in the US.

(1.1) Local and National Rituals of Bonding

An important and emotionally engaging instrument of cohort-building appears to be cooking, eating and celebrating together. Some important national and local holidays fall into the students' study period in Cologne: One is the US-American Thanksgiving, the other the official opening of the Street Carnival in Cologne. Generally, students enjoy and partake with

vigor and enthusiasm in the preparation and celebration of both of these two events. Moreover, most of the students, including the Chinese, get strongly involved in the Christian tradition of Christmas and the long preparatory advent season which includes visiting the local Christmas markets and drinking mulled wine. The cohort organized a Thanksgiving and a Christmas party, where all students contributed with food and drink from their home countries. The social practices of cooking, eating and spending time together has proven to be a highly effective strategy of bonding and cohort-building, with the integration of the Chinese students working especially well in this particular field.

Chinese students sometimes might be a bit shy at lectures, but when it comes to cooking they are rocking the stage...

This example of other-perception shows the student's awareness and understanding of the fact that behavior depends on context and counterpart and that different, sometimes even conflicting, values and behavior are expressed in different circumstances and/ or with different communicative agents.

(1.2) Doing and Watching Sports Together

Another very efficient way of bonding appears to be doing sports together. Quite early on, during their stay in Cologne, the male members of the cohort decided to play football together on a weekly basis. This activity included all (male) Chinese students, who had, up until then, not really been part of the group. The student who took the initiative in organizing this football team wrote:

I think that team sports, such as soccer, strengthen the spirit of our cohort even further and prepare us for upcoming group works for several reasons. First of all, you always need to rely on your group members. Furthermore, helping each other plays an important role as well, no matter if it is on the field or in the university. Lastly, every team is only as strong as its weakest member. So you always have to ensure that everyone in the group is satisfied with the results and that arising problems are approached together.

This enthusiasm was fully shared by Chinese students who described how joyful laughter and physical exertion during a game of football combined into a "symphony of passion and warm-blood" and concludes: "I hope we can organize more activities just like this and I believe I can fully enjoy it." It is interesting how linguistically the "I" dissolves into the collective "we", thus expressing a sense of involvement in a shared and global practice. Similarly, watching sports together seems to create strong bonds too: After watching a football match together during which cohort members of different nationalities became passionate supporters of Cologne's local football team, 1.FC Köln, one of the (female) students commented:

The FC Köln unfortunately did not score, but we had a great evening as a group, got closer in our common ambition to support 'our' soccer club from Cologne. Obviously, when getting local no other category matters. At some point we all simply became citizens of Cologne, loyal fans of the soccer club and no discussions about intercultural interactions were necessary. The only culture we belonged to was the culture of the soccer. It was very fascinating for me to observe this and to realize that each one of us does not belong only to his 'national' culture, but also being a part of many other different (sub-) cultures.

This student experienced and realized that national affiliations and frontiers become irrelevant in the face of other, more strongly identity-forming memberships in social collectives (i.e. belonging to the GlobalMBA students group, fans of Cologne's local football club).

(2) Dealing with Criticism, Disappointment and Conflict

There are only a few instances where criticism is overtly expressed in the diaries; this might be due to the fact that students are aware of the fact that the teacher reads the diaries – and reads the diaries for assessment's sake, too. However, whenever criticism is expressed, it concerns the attitudes and behaviors of fellow students. Consider the following, where an American student writes an entire diary entry about "assertive people" (without mentioning the person's name). She describes her reactions as ranging from being angry to crying. Then she thinks about how to deal with this kind of problem in the future and writes:

I want us all to work together in a respectful manner, realizing that everyone thinks differently. Hopefully by the end of this program, I will have learned how to deal better with this type of personality.

Although, criticism is rarely openly brought up either in the group or in the diaries, the following example shows that when frustration and disappointment was voiced, it can have a fruitful outcome. One (non-Polish) student was dissatisfied with the way the Polish students, who were expected to be the 'hosts' in Poland, behaved towards the rest of the cohort after their arrival in Warsaw:

I also talked with X and Y about the last weeks and my disappointment concerning their absence when it comes to exploring Poland. They both took it very seriously which I liked, and they really seemed to be sad, (...) It gave me a better feeling talking to them and I should have definitely done that earlier.

This incident occurred in the social context of a very strongly knit cohort. The student in question apparently decided that the interpersonal issues had to be brought up rather sooner than later in order to keep the otherwise satisfying relationships on track. As the quote also shows, the person criticized was receptive towards the feedback from his fellow student and willing and able to deal with that criticism in an appropriate and constructive manner. In this sense, explicit verbal metacommunication not only served as an essential and highly efficient tool for handling a particular problem. It was also a way of re-establishing mutual understanding and reinforcing the satisfying aspects of a relationship.

The following diary entry describes a conflict which is based on a different understanding of academic conventions. One of the German students in the current cohort was confronted with plagiarism during group work. He was shocked by the behavior of his Chinese fellow student, but suppressed his first reaction of expressing anger. Again, metacommunication and dialogue helped to resolve the culturally informed conflict:

Instead of that I chose a more moderate tone and recapitulated the whole thing with Plagiarism. I explained that it was a very severe issue and that it was everyone's own responsibility to assure that his or her work corresponded academic guidelines. My team member apologized approximately 10000 times and rewrote his part of the assignment within two days. At the end I am glad I chose a face-saving communication style (...)

This diary entry illustrates the student's process of working out the specifics of how to produce situation-appropriate communicative behavior, reverting to cultural theory to explain his reactions. His high level of perceptiveness and self and other-awareness are important indicators for his capacity to be flexible and open to other cultures and to adapt his interactional and behavioral practices to his interactant.

In conclusion, the aspects which were most critically assessed in personal behavior and attitude amongst cohort members were: assertiveness, abruptness, stereotyping, the Chinese students' lack of ability to work independently in groups, and lack of commitment in leisure time group activities. Criticism is seldom expressed openly. However, if it happens, the person bringing up the criticism feels relieved and is satisfied about the result of the metacommunication.

(3) Dealing with the Experience of Otherness and Foreignness

Without any doubt, the feelings of otherness and foreignness were strongest for the Chinese students. There was anger about stereotypes; there was irritation about the German study culture, where Chinese students felt lost from time to time and there was irritation about local traditions. For example, during Carnival, public kissing is widespread and common. However, a Chinese female student who had "dreamed about carnival for months" was "confused", "angry" and "disappointed" when she was confronted with this "rude" local habit. She explained her irritation by reverting to the categories of nationality and gender: As "a traditional Chinese girl", she "did not want to do such intimate action with strangers". This student's lack of flexibility and ability to understand and adapt to a locale-specific practice led to her sense of frustration and alienation from the surrounding culture.

What transpired as a rather disconcerting finding was that Chinese students seem to suffer over-proportionately from stereotyped representations of China and the Chinese. In one diary entry, a female Chinese student indicated that she did "not feel very well" and "uncomfortable" because:

I do think people have some kind of misunderstanding of China and Chinese people. Like China is lack of human right, people always cheat and plagiarism, people do not respect rights and our living condition is very bad".

The feeling of being excluded and not being taken seriously seems to be a major source of frustration and alienation for most of the Chinese students. In the current cohort, a Chinese student complains about Germans and Americans lacking sensitivity and patience with their Chinese colleagues for asking too many "stupid" questions:

I can tell it is discrimination to our Chinese. Some Americans and Germans think we always ask lots of foolish questions, and bored to answer us. But I think these questions are inevitable, because Europe is a new land to us, we cannot understand something doesn't mean we stupid.

The Chinese student here uses binary language ("Some Americans and Germans" vs. "we"/"us") for his criticism. The 'Americans' and 'Germans' perceived lack of sensitivity can be interpreted as a lack of interactional competence. In the following example, a German student also uses the language of "othering" in order to criticise the Chinese for not asking enough questions.

When we finally were finished and asked whether everyone had understood the system it turned out the Chinese students did not but they had not asked us to clarify anything either.

In this example language is built around the very idea of difference and is used – albeit presumably unconsciously – to "other" people. Again, the very pronouns "they" and "us" here highlight the subjectively perceived differences between the national groups within the cohort. The use of the first person plural pronoun "us" places the author of the diary entry within a group of shared identity (i.e. the Germans, Polish and U.S. Americans). By contrast, the use of the third person plural "they" excludes the Chinese members of the cohort from this shared group identity and puts them at a distance.

Results of the Learning Process from the Student's Perspective: Essay Writing

The diaries are written in Cologne, Warsaw, Dalian. In Jacksonville, students write a final reflective essay summing up and evaluating their intercultural experience and learning process during the last 14 months. Apart from the intercultural learning as such we wanted to know: In what ways has the study experience "changed" the students? So far, we have had access only to one cohort's essays. The following topics were mentioned repeatedly:

(1) **Global thinking:** Students found they think "more globally" after the master study course, they felt an "enrichment of worldview" as well as an ability to change perspectives.

(2) **Changed attitude towards their own country:** Students' attitudes towards their own country changed in the sense that they felt more aware of strengths and weaknesses of their home country they took for granted before. Some even "fell in love" with their own country!

(3) **Appreciation for intercultural teamwork:** Learning how to work in international groups is seen as one of the main outcomes of the study program, as the following quote illustrates:

...to find out and use the strengths of every single group member and to overcome the cultural differences which are also reflected in the different working styles and approaches.

(4) **Personal development and growth:** Last but not least, all students feel that they have personally developed during the 15-month period. They feel "less ethnocentric", they have seen "how my own limitations determine intercultural experience", they see similarities, where before they saw mainly differences. We found that our students grew not only in terms of knowing cultures better, but they matured as well in terms of personal development. They learned about their own personal limitations and about their own strengths, they learned to see others and themselves from a different perspective. And they found out that there is more that binds them than divides and that the differences between cultures count less than the communalities, as one student from the US put it most impressively:

Sure, we have our cultural differences but it's a surreal feeling to come to realize that there are people just like you all over the world. This aspect goes deeper than culture. This goes down to the basic level of humanities.

Research Constraints

The results from one single cohort cannot, of course, be generalized. The diaries of many more cohorts need to be analyzed before any scientifically valid conclusions can be drawn. Nevertheless, the results from analyzing the first round of diaries have revealed the following: Diary-writing seems to be indeed an effective tool for a more conscious handling of intercultural experience. Moreover, we discovered that – with regard to Kolb's Experiential Model of Learning – the first stages of the learning cycle have taken place: concrete experience → observations and reflections → formation of abstract concepts and generalizations. In some cases even the fourth stage has been reached, the stage of "testing of implications and contexts in new situations". Some instances in the diaries reveal that students have used and applied their new ideas gained

from certain experiences in order to resolve future issues within the cohort. It would, therefore, be an important future task to explore to what extent and in what sense program graduates have been able to benefit from the experience once they have started their professional careers.

Another research constraint is the fact that we do not know about the students' level of cultural knowledge and intercultural competence before they start the master program. The entry levels concerning academic background and exposure to cultural experience and theory tend to be very different: Most of the U.S. American, Chinese and Polish students come from a mainly business background. Besides, most of the Chinese students have never been out of China before and tend to have little or no theoretical background with regard to intercultural communication theory, while some of the German students come from a language or cultural studies background. Obviously, the level of cultural awareness will influence the shape and quality of knowledge they will acquire during the study course. A possible solution to this problem could be to design some kind of initial cultural awareness test in order to find out about the students' cultural literacy entry level.

The main problem with intercultural competence assessment lies in the fact that it is, in the vast majority of cases, almost exclusively based on self-assessment. In line with this aspect is the not negligible fact that students are aware they are writing for course assessment and a program lecturer. This means there is always the potential danger that they are playing along writing what they think the lecturer wants to hear. Diaries then would not be a social document, but an artifact written for the eyes of the beholder.

Moreover, while most of our students are able to reflect on their cultural experiences and also have the analytical skills to conceptualize what they have experienced – two of Kolb's essential requirements concerning the learner – not all of the students are *per se* willing to be involved in the diary writing project which they know is intended for publication. With one cohort so far we have had to face the challenge that quite a substantial number of students did not give their permission to be included in this research project.

Conclusion

One of the main advantages of drawing on diary data has been the multifaceted nature of the insights we have obtained so far. Insofar as the diaries provide an emic (insider's) viewpoint, they have given us valuable insights into the students' perceptions and thoughts concerning their own and others' behaviors as well as of their interpretations of problematic occurrences and interactions. A further main benefit lies in the insights the interactants themselves can gain on their own behaviors. As such, writing diaries can provide an important self-learning and self-development tool.

Although the present project is as yet based on small-scale data, the findings so far have brought to the fore that considerably more thought and effort has been invested by program developers and directors in order to enhance cohort cohesiveness and group-building, and, in particular, with regard to the integration of the Chinese cohort members. While some of the conflicts we read about were due to conflicting personality profiles, we have been able to identify the following culturally informed sources of conflicts: Different academic conventions, different communication styles and different levels of English language competency have an impact not only on the amount of classroom participation but also on the cohort's overall interactional practices and dynamics. The Chinese tend to be relatively moderate and reserved in their communication patterns, while the U.S. American native speakers and the often very fluent German students tend to dominate classroom discussions and work in teams. There is clear evidence that some Chinese cohort feel left out and misunderstood by the rest of cohort. In the light of the findings that at least some Chinese perceive a lack of sensitivity and understanding on the part of the Western cohort members, the students' better understanding of the consequences of their behaviors and of how their actions are perceived by others might improve group dynamics in the cohort.

We hope to have shown with this description of our research project that by including a learner-centred dimension in the form of diary-writing, it is possible to gain additional, beneficial insights into the intercultural learning process. In addition to more conventional qualitative research approaches (e.g. self-assessment questionnaires), the diaries so far have proven to be an important tool for furthering our conceptual understanding of intercultural effectiveness and for furthering the students' own process of self-improvement and learning.

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