

INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION: INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS BY HANESOVA DANA***Säde-Pirkko Nissilä**

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Abstract

The research material was collected during an EU project of internationalization of higher education students. The material was relatively ample. It gave voice to university exchange students from various countries and their experiences in destination countries. The material offered many viewing angles. The findings were observed from three perspectives: experiences, reflection, and conceptualization. Relationships and interaction were analyzed through virtues and emotional experiences. In experiential learning the cognitive was completed by emotional encounters. In experiential learning it was important to get active experiences of people, organizations, living and studying as well as of languages. Reflective practice had started well, but it was not yet far advanced, which is natural. The most useful outcome from the exchange period were pragmatic experiences. It was a good start to nurture imagination, emotion, and cognition.

Keywords: Erasmus exchange, Individual and collective reflection, Interpretation of experiences

INTRODUCTION

The ability to learn and understand a foreign culture is based on actual experience as demonstrated in the document "Internalization of higher education: Intercultural experiences" by Dana Hanesova. The report is written in an enthusiastic spirit. It has a logical structure and framework which allows different experiences to emerge. It gives voice to a wide variety of experiencers. The viewpoint of the material that was collected from the involved exchange students and teachers can be studied from three perspectives: experiences, reflection, and conceptualization (cf. Kolb 1984). For the experiences to be successful, a particular kind of relationship and interaction is required which must entail virtues and emotions such as collaboration, openness, respect, and trust. Also, concern, affection and hope are important. They are connected by faith in the inherent value of education and intercultural education especially. In experiential learning the cognitive is completed by emotional experiences. These experiences can arise from new cultural and physical environments or through encountering foreigners in one's own country "I have worked in all continents of the world, except the pole areas. I would not give away any of those experiences: the color of the sky, the typical weathers, the scent of the air. Especially the memories of the people I met are preserved in my heart" says an experienced exchange teacher.

Evaluation of the results**1) Experiential learning: active experiences**

Some preconditions exist if one is to benefit from experiences. First, experience combined with individual trust is essential. In the next quote trust is strongly connected with expectations and hopes:

"My friend and I were among the first students from the University of Mauritius allowed to go for the Erasmus programme. We were recommended Matej Bel University. I personally choose to come because I met two teachers from Matej Bel University the previous year in Mauritius and, frankly, they were very convincing and, above all very kind. It was comfortable to imagine how much they could share with me in terms of education and culture if I went for Erasmus to Slovakia..." (13)

"My first impression in Finland was very positive. I was so excited about everything I also experienced that Finns and Swedish speaking Finns were really open to foreigners, they were also helpful and kind. - The biggest difference between Slovak and Finnish culture I noticed is trust. That is very important in Finland." (23)

In the students' essays one can discern individual, systemic, and organizational points of view. Individual trust is intuitive, momentary and a like-minded experience, like above. The second, systemic trust is reciprocal, learnt and maintained:

"Later I realized even deeper another surprising thing: that in Finland nobody steals anything. They just left their stuff anywhere and it stayed there untouched. That was for me really shocking but in a positive way. But it took me some time to adapt to this because in Slovakia we don't trust people so much." ...I also experienced that Finns and Swedish speaking Finns were really open to foreigners, they were also helpful and kind. -The biggest difference between Slovak and Finnish culture I noticed is trust. That is very important in Finland." (23)

Organizational trust refers to togetherness, shared aims, and repetitive interaction. To reach the goals, some shared means are necessary. Of them there are divergent experiences:

My buddy did not meet me, I don't know why, but when I saw that she was not interested, I helped myself. As for learning, I used the services of a library, which was very nice and large." (04)

The buddies worked marvellously. They offered all help that I needed. I got to know everything about here through them. They gave a lot of their time to make me visit the faculties, get my ISIC card, go to bank, do my first grocery shopping, and offered my first travel fee and meal. (05)

Organizational trust appeared at the university level in divergent ways as well:

“University people and other students were helpful... we (exchange students) helped each other for example with the Migration Office paperwork”. (11)

“I obtained information especially in the study office from contact with foreign students and from domestic students. During the first day, the admin took us around the university and helped us get into the system in which the university works. The university representatives including the dean introduced their study system to us. The buddies ... also better explained the grading and testing system at the university.” (18)

No one physically took us around the university. My colleague and I took care of everything on our own ... And as far as the university is concerned, we always looked for classes there where the class was supposed to be, and we also mainly asked everyone around, without that it wouldn't be possible. (21)

“I was bothered by the terrible bureaucracy. Everything required a signature, and the campus was huge. The first days were very difficult in this regard. Paper here, paper there, pay it. Double registration of course.” (07)

Experiences of studying and living

“I think a student life in Mauritius is less stressful because students have a lot of facilities like free transport, free health care. Most of them still live with their parents so everything is provided. ... So, in terms of facilities students are stress-free in Mauritius. I must admit that it is quite unusual to hear a student in Mauritius doing part time jobs because we don't really need it but in Slovakia it was very common.” (13)

“I liked that the French students in Nantes were much more active in the lectures than we were. The lectures did not consist of just dictating the notes to the students and writing them down by the students, but here and there we also had the opportunity to experience a discussion among them... On the other hand, what I didn't like at all was the length of the lesson. One hour of one course lasted 2-3 hours, i.e., 120 to 180 minutes. This came to me incredibly much in connection with the fact there were several such hours during the day.... In the case of such long lectures and seminars, in my opinion, the student has no chance to concentrate.” (21)

“Teachers at our Finnish university were really open-minded and helpful. The teachers' English was great. Every lesson we had was in English together with other students. If not they spoke to students in Swedish but later they explained it to us in English. I noticed that students appreciated teachers and teachers their students. Students seemed to like to learn something new, there was always a big discussion during the lesson, they were paying attention and communicated with the teacher... Everything about the courses was on the website of the university... When I compare my student life before

mobility and at mobility I can say that before coming here I did not really experience the beauty a student life...I was always in a good mood and without any stress. (23) Negative part would be that there are not enough courses in English in my study specialization here during winter term. I would be glad to know about this ahead since I had to join other study specializations and despite all help, I had bit of struggle with that.” (02)

“I really struggled with the Slovak academic information system as its structure is in Slovak. To me it was not clear, it was too demanding to find my way in it. I had to rely on my supervisor to register me for my courses and to make sure everything was OK academically. The system of study was mostly Slovak-oriented, although some courses were in English.” (10)

“In one course at my Italian university, no international student understood the professor at all, even though she tried to speak clearly. Probably it was because in the course bachelors and masters studied together.” (18)

Experiences of language use

“The teachers' English was great”, “The students spoke excellent English” were the most frequently expressed opinions. English was the language that united students. There were very few comments of insufficient English skills among teachers, students, and other actors. Those who had deficit skills in English had often 'side roles in the play' and could not communicate with foreigners. Bureaucracy, arranging official licenses and small everyday challenges that demanded special language skills were negative factors in exchange experiences. Another viewpoint was the difficulty in learning the language of the host country. It was felt impossible in the short time of the stay. All this refers to the existence of “lingua franca”, i.e., the common language, English that unites all academic students and teachers.

2) Reflection

Upon what should an exchange student reflect? To get the process of identity and intercultural development moving, it is not enough to reflect only on the environment, behavior, and competencies, which form the outer level, but to try also to understand the lived experiences and give meanings to them. The inner levels: beliefs, identity, and mission should also be recognized and reflected. These criteria determine the individual functions on the outer levels (environment, behavior, and competencies) and allow a reverse influence. (Korthagen 2004.)

The next figure shows the process of reflecting in intercultural development. !!! (the figure is on the next page)

An example of the contents of reflection ...

Environment and expected competence: *“I chose Tallinn (Estonia), because I knew that Estonia had a very good education system, and the university was at a very good level. I chose this city also because it is very well located for travelling around to the surrounding countries. And that Estonia is not one of the most expensive countries to live in ... (16)*

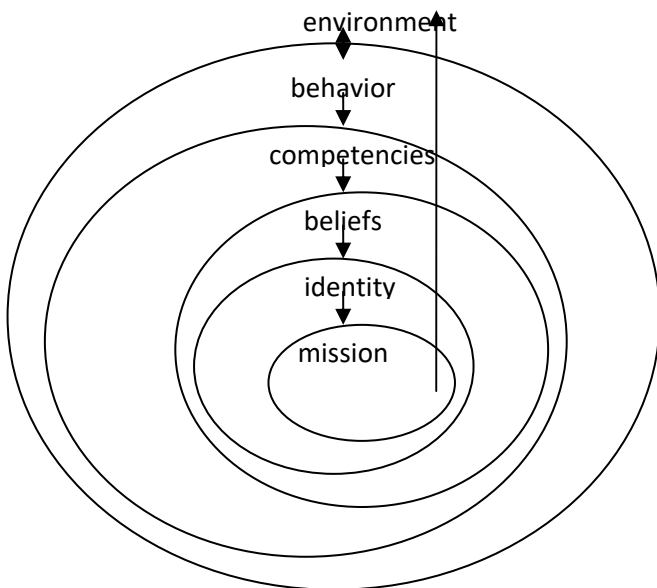


Figure 1. The description of the different levels of core reflection (Korthagen 2004)

Behavior in a different culture: *Next positive surprise: Mutual trust between teachers and children in primary schools. Also, their friendliness and tolerance... I did not experience any negative cultural stress, only positive 'shocks. ... Cultural discoveries: The way the kindergartens operate in Finland... From my experience with two nationalities in Finland, I think the Swedes are open and communicative. Finns, on the other hand, are more closed.'* (01)

My first culture surprise moment was when I noticed that my dinner (main meal of the day at 3 p.m.) is lunch for people from Spain or Italy and that eat dinner (main meal) at 10 p.m.! But I did not suffer any culture stress. (12)

"The first culture shock in Slovakia? - The food consists mostly of cheese especially sheep cheese; also rice and cheese - never saw or ate this before. ...Social care and medical care - these are the areas which is for me difficult to explain or understand - this was embarrassing." (14)

About the beliefs, preconceptions: *"I think France is a country that a lot of people have quite a bit of information about, at least Europeans. We can learn about France in schools, and, also, because the French have many ways how to present their country outside their territory, mostly through their culture. Because I have been studying French for several years, and I have visited this country in the past, I had quite an overview. In any case, I must admit that after arriving, there was still something to learn."* (21)

Identity and mission were such as did not appear in the essays of experiences. Philosophical thinking will develop later. These intercultural experiences have broadened the students' mindsets and are surely to come about when the right time has come. Some writers refer to culture shocks throughout the essays. That word is rather superficially used.

A real culture shock is much more than experiencing different culture that makes one feel uneasy at times. Feeling uneasy belongs to normal behavior in meeting foreign cultures including habits, environments, and languages. This kind of uneasiness appears when the student compares the new ways of life to domestic habits. The experience also helps one better understand his or her own culture. It is an achievement showing that one has experienced cultural differences, gone through them, and come out as a winner.

3) Conceptualization

Development in the conceptualization of the students' experiences remains rather modest during their intercultural educational period. Subsequently, the same modest pace occurs in their actual lives and professions. The students have obviously pragmatic experiences which are partly unorganized in their minds. The deeper interpretations will come later as they work in their studies or professions. The memories are sure to be preserved in their minds and become revealed later in their choices and works. Our hope is that these students will find the deeper level of their experiences and that the door will then be opened to their missions which can be based on their cross-cultural exposure to foreign environments. Hopefully, these experiences will thus be reflected in global attitudes and decisions.

Final comments

The resources required for the flourishing of global knowledge futures are intrinsically human faculties, which are not so dependent on economic and material resources and are thus potentially more sustainable. Creativity and innovation; imagination, inspiration, and intuition; anticipation and foresight; dialogue and collaboration are all human capacities that know no bounds except those we self-impose (Gidley 2013.) These aims and qualities are worth pursuing. Do we have them as hidden curricula or a conscious statement in all cross-cultural exchange activities? They should be conscious. Albert Einstein offers another point of view: "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For while knowledge defines all we currently know and understand, imagination points to all we might yet discover and create." Intercultural education and encounters meet these needs by nurturing imagination, emotion, and cognition.

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