

Students Perceptions and Experiences of Intercultural Communication in Library and Information Science Education Programmes

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Abstract: This paper discusses the research project that explored intercultural communication in library and information science education, more specifically in online learning environment. This research focuses on answering the following central question: What is the nature of successful intercultural communication and what are the factors and conditions which support this? Findings of this research project were used to develop a framework which identified a series of factors that needs to be considered in the process of facilitating intercultural communication in library and information science education.

Keywords: library and information science, higher education, online education, e-learning, intercultural communication, qualitative study.

1. Introduction

The information and learning environment has changed significantly during the last ten years; there are new societal needs, students' expectations, technological developments, and learning and information practices (LisbonSCOP2013). Education paradigms are shifting to include more online learning, blended and hybrid learning, and collaborative models (Johnson et al., 2014). With the development of open education philosophies, open educational resources (OER) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) educational learning objects, courses, programs, providers and practices have moved increasingly across national boundaries.

Internationalization has become one of the driving forces behind the higher education (HE) policies in many countries (Van Vught et al., 2002; Rumbley, Altbach & Reisberg, 2012) and should be “seen as both a reaction to, but also an agent of, globalization” (Knight, 2005, p.5). Teichler (2008, p.25) notes that all available analysis suggests that international activities within HE have substantially increased over recent years, and all predictions suggest that they are likely to increase further in the future. Deardorff et al. (2012, p.ix) confirm that in the course of the millennial transition, the internationalization of HE has moved from a marginal to a core dimension of HE worldwide.

In Europe, the European Union has, for many years, exerted a major influence on internationalisation and cross-border co-operation in HE. The Bologna Process and the initiatives of the European Union, with its mobility programs (e.g. Erasmus and Erasmus Mundus), have been the most influential in shaping the activities of HE institutions in the field of internationalisation (Virkus & Tammaro, 2005; Abdullahi et al, 2007; Teichler, 2008; Deardorff et al., 2012). However, *The Erasmus Impact Study* (2014, p.21) that analysed the effects of mobility on the employability and competences of students and the internationalisation of HE institutions highlighted that “Erasmus should be expanded and more attention should be paid under Erasmus+ to the quality of mobility, rather than to its sheer quantity”.

Within this context intercultural communication is becoming increasingly important in education but also in our society in general due to the rise of globalisation and increasingly multicultural study and work environments (Virkus & Uukkivi, 2013, p.359). Abdullahi et al. (2007, p.8) believe that today, most HE institutions recognize the need to provide their students with knowledge and skills necessary to function effectively across cultures and nations. They also note that libraries are considered the main providers of access to different cultures, ideas and knowledge, informal learning, consulting; meeting places for people/users from different communities, thus facilitating social and cultural interaction between citizens with different backgrounds. International and intercultural opportunities are essential components in educating and training library and information professionals.

Therefore, to foster a greater understanding of cultural differences and to provide support both in the face-to-face and in the online intercultural study environment studies are needed (Virkus & Uukkivi, 2013, p.359), especially as the quality of community and interaction is becoming a key discriminator among hybrid learning environments (Johnson et al., 2014, p.10).

Several authors have discussed international aspects of library and information science (LIS) education; for example, Iivonen et al. (1998), Robinson et al. (2000), Robinson & Bawden (2001), Kajberg (2002, 2003, 2004), Kajberg & Lorrington (2005), Virkus & Harbo (2002), Dixon & Tammaro (2003), Townley et al. (2003), Babini (2004), Virkus & Wood (2004, 2005), Abdullahi & Kajberg (2004), Tammaro (2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2011, 2012),

Virkus & Tammaro (2005), Abdullahi et al. (2007), Bawden et al. (2007), Mehra & Bishop (2007), Virkus (2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2011a, 2011b), Abdullahi (2007, 2008), Cortez et al. (2008), Mehra (2008), Mehra et al. (2008, 2010, 2011), Igel (2010), and Virkus & Lepik (2010).

In the earlier studies the focus was on the internationalization of curricula and the need for collaboration in LIS education; then issues of ICT-based education were also explored. Although the main focus was on the development or adaption of curricula, the issues of intercultural communication were also briefly discussed. For example, Abdullahi (2007, 2008) has discussed the need to take into account the needs of learners with different cultural background; however, he discusses these issues in the context of face-to-face education. Iivonen, Sonnenwald, Parma & Poole-Kober (1998), Virkus & Sponberg (1999), Townley, Geng & Zhang (2003), and Cortez, Sandusky & Aristeguieta-Trillos (2008) have explored intercultural communication in the ICT-based education context. Mehra et al. (2011, p.48) highlighted “the need to take a more cohesive, concrete, and systematic approach to diversity integration in the online and/or face-to-face LIS curriculum by furthering actions at various levels of implementation”.

Although previous studies in LIS have analyzed some cross-cultural communication aspects in e-learning, the analysis of the LIS literature showed that no previous work was identified which examined the nature of intercultural communication and the factors that support it in the e-learning environment. Several authors have highlighted the need to study intercultural communication in the disciplinary context, for example, Benn (1996), Woods (2007), Germain-Rutherford & Kerr (2008), and Fortuin & Bush (2010). These authors believe that different ways of thinking, use of language and learning orientation in the disciplinary context might also influence intercultural communication.

A research project was designed to explore intercultural communication in LIS education, more specifically in online learning environment. The study was motivated by the need to better support the international students in the International Master in Digital Library Learning (DILL) programme. DILL is a two-year collaborative master program between Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences in Norway, Tallinn University in Estonia and Parma University in Italy that begin in 2007 within the framework of the European Union Erasmus Mundus programme. Although DILL was designed as a face-to-face educational programme, the e-learning component was extensively integrated into the programme (Virkus, 2008b). The findings of this study were used to develop a framework which identified a series of factors that need to be considered in the process of facilitating intercultural communication in LIS curricula and could help guide academics in library and information science education.

2. Methodology

The study focused on answering the following central question: What is the nature of successful intercultural communication in e-learning and what are the factors which support this? The major research questions generated on the basis of the central research question were identified as follows: a) How do library and information science students perceive intercultural communication in e-learning? b) Which factors support effective intercultural communication in e-learning? c) What are the opinions of students about developing the Digital Library Learning (DILL) curriculum into an e-learning mode?

This was an exploratory study that involved a qualitative approach, a case study within a constructivist research paradigm. Document analysis and semi-structured interviews were the main data collection methods in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two groups of students - students from the International Master in Digital Library Learning (DILL), and students from the Parma-Northumbria Joint Course, the International Master in Information Studies (MIIS) (Virkus & Uukkivi, 2013).

Thirty six in-depth interviews were conducted with students from eighteen countries; from Australia, Canada, Colombia, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Italy, Kenya, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Maldives, Malta, Romania, South Africa, Tanzania, and Thailand. All 18 students from DILL curriculum and 18 students from MIIS curriculum were interviewed. An online interviewing tool Trillian (a free instant messenger) was used for interviews. Skype, Google Talk and e-mail were used in addition to Trillian (Virkus & Uukkivi, 2013).

A set of questions was prepared and interview guides were developed for DILL students and MIIS students. Two groups of students had to answer somewhat different questions: for example, DILL students were asked about potential of using DILL programme in an online environment and the questions for MIIS programme students were mainly related to the online environment. Interview questions were divided into the following sections: introduction, supporting intercultural communication, barriers of intercultural communication, differences between the roles in intercultural communication, preferences in intercultural communication and conclusion (Virkus & Uukkivi, 2013).

3. Findings

The majority of questions in the case study interviews aimed at gaining an understanding of interviewees' views, attitudes, beliefs and behaviour related to the intercultural communication. This section provides a summary of the findings in relation to the three research questions of this study:

- How do library and information science students perceive intercultural communication in e-learning?

- Which factors support effective intercultural communication in e-learning?
- What are the opinions of students about developing the Digital Library Learning (DILL) curriculum into an e-learning mode?

RQ 1: How do library and information science students perceive intercultural communication in e-learning?

The case study data showed that students felt that the learning process was more versatile in an e-learning mode, it allowed to cross time zones, financial and geographical borders, and supported communication in a foreign language. However, at the same time, it was more time consuming and had its restrictions due to its dependence on technology. Thus, intercultural communication in e-learning was perceived controversially by students. On the one hand, it was felt that online environment simplified things, but on the other hand it made things more complicated: for example, text based online tools gave more time to interpret and to compile messages, and it made it possible to re-read the messages and it was easier to keep track of the written text. At the same time technical problems aggravated communication, as well as the absence of additional visual and auditive data in text-based online tools. Synchronous online tools had also both positive and negative sides; for example, the videoconference helped to see nonverbal cues and read body language, but the camera often narrowed and dictated the visual side which meant that the additional visual information was still quite limited. The interviewees felt that the e-environment created an emotional distance which made it difficult to get to know each other and to create relationships and that was the reason why people felt uncertain and isolated. Feelings of uncertainty and isolation were considered to be the two main reasons why people give up on e-learning. The time factor was also seen in different ways. On the positive side, it was seen as a way to learn without leaving home, on the negative side it was considered to take up too much time when going over the materials, entering text and interpreting messages in discussion forums.

RQ 2: Which factors support effective intercultural communication in e-learning?

The case study data revealed the factors that have an influence on intercultural communication in e-learning environment: pedagogical, personal, cultural and technological factors. The most emphasized factors by learners were pedagogical factors: effective learner support systems, meaningful and comprehensive learning environment for students, and teachers' competencies. The pedagogical factors were followed by the personal factors: learner's and teacher's personality traits, motivation, similarities with co-learners, and learners' competencies. The cultural factors included cultural similarities, cultural competencies, and avoidance of stereotypes. Two technological factors emerged: a supportive infrastructure and learning environment, and technological competencies. Competence emerged as an important factor in all

categories. The most important skills were considered to be collaboration skills, language skills, computer skills and pedagogical skills of teachers; the most important knowledge was considered to be knowledge of different cultures.

The success factors for intercultural communication were associated as follows: coping with different obstacles was considered to be more successful if there was a previous experience with intercultural communication in e-learning, participating was considered to be easier if the student and the lecturer were from the same culture, communication was supported by the similarities between the students, students were more eager to participate if they had good language and computer skills. However, one certain factor can't be emphasized when talking about intercultural communication; all identified factors help to raise the efficiency of intercultural communication in e-learning and should be viewed holistically.

RQ 3: What are the opinions of students about developing the Digital Library Learning (DILL) curriculum into an e-learning mode?

The case study data revealed that the positive sides of DILL curriculum were rather seen in learning face-to-face which is why the students were not in favour to conduct the curriculum as a whole in e-learning environment. Students were worried about not being able to handle the technological limitations of e-learning; some students said they wouldn't be able to participate due to the poor technical infrastructure of their home country. As for international learning, students preferred travelling and face-to-face communication with the students and lecturers from another culture. However, it should be mentioned that students who preferred traditional teaching mode and saw biggest gains in such a study form had come to study in face-to-face learning.

The comparison of the results of this study with earlier studies showed that in all probability, the results of studies conducted in other fields can be used in planning and conducting international e-learning in library and information science field. However, according to the results of this study, development of major competencies (collaboration skills, language skills, computer skills, pedagogical skills, knowledge of different cultures) is essential in intercultural communication and should be integrated into e-learning of LIS. Students saw that the success of intercultural communication was also affected by teachers' competencies. Earlier studies have not also addressed the personality characteristics in e-learning in the intercultural communication context. Learners emphasized teachers' and learners' personality characteristics such as helpfulness, friendliness, flexibility and positivity.

4 Conclusions

A case study research strategy was used within a constructivist research paradigm to find out the factors which influence intercultural communication in

library and information science education, and more specifically in online learning environment. Semi-structured interviews with two groups of students – students from the International Master in Digital Library Learning, and students from the Parma-Northumbria Joint Course, the International Master in Information Studies indicated that pedagogical, personal, cultural and technological factors were very important in international communication process. These factors should be considered carefully when developing international online programmes in LIS education. However, these factors should be viewed holistically: all identified factors help to raise the efficiency of intercultural communication in e-learning.

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