

Research Brief – Humanising Intercultural Interactions in the Online Education Space

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INTRODUCTION

In this brief, we discuss the potential for “othering” and dehumanisation as a challenge in online intercultural interactions in tertiary education settings. As a response to this challenge, we argue for the need to adopt certain strategies to “humanise” participants in these online interactions. Such strategies are particularly important with the increased use of online teaching environments due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In what follows, we first take stock of some of the cultural issues facing tertiary teachers and students, and then set out how these issues may be exasperated in online teaching environments. We next identify three effective strategies—self-introductions/cultural awareness, collaborative learning and videoconferencing—for mitigating “othering” in intercultural interactions. We illustrate in this document how this effectiveness can be linked to these strategies’ potential for humanising online intercultural interactions. In sum, online “contact situations” between diverse student populations require planning and moderation in the opening weeks of a class. Yet, this upfront investment in student/class cohesion yields a comfortable working environment in which students and lecturers feel empowered to learn, and to explore the strengths and limitations of online tools to assist learning.

BACKGROUND

For close to three decades, information technology has been used in a variety of ways to bring together diverse student populations from different geographic locations and social communities. Students may hail from different countries, speak different languages and/or understand the world through different cultural lenses. Moreover, age and/or technological know-how emerged as another important kind of “diversity” among student populations. For instance, in the early 2000s, some researchers proposed a distinction between “digital natives” and “digital immigrants”—the argument being that the latter group, born before 1980, were less likely to be familiar with technology and social media (Palfrey and Gasser 2008).

The digital native/digital immigrant distinction is apt in some ways (as we will discuss below), but the link between “digital nativeness” and age/generation is almost certainly overstated (see Pasfield-Neofitou 2013). Yet, this only serves to emphasise the complexities of “diversity” in contemporary tertiary settings, and our need to facilitate successful communication between these diverse groups. It is imperative for educators in the online space to become culturally aware of their students’ needs and understand how intercultural competency can have an influence on students’ learning in online settings (Allen & Seaman, 2016).

This is particularly important at a time when the increasing prevalence of online learning, coupled with rising costs in international higher education and more affordable technology that have pushed students to staying home and studying online instead of travelling, amongst other factors, has led to a dramatic rise in online student populations (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Moreover, as we write this in late 2020, the world has changed dramatically. With strict travel restrictions around the globe international student mobility has practically stopped.

Hundreds of millions of students and educators have been affected by this. In COVID-19 crisis, we have turned to Zoom, Skype, and other technologies for online teaching as life rafts. If our use of such technologies before COVID-19 was already important, it is now nothing short of vital for both international and domestic education alike. And just as vital is our understanding, and correct implementation of intercultural competency in this online environment. As Helms points out, the pandemic is a good reminder of why “we need students who understand global phenomena, can see xenophobic and culture-bound reactions for what they are, and are prepared to work with colleagues around the world to address global crises in the short term, and contribute to long-term solutions through research and the advancement of knowledge.” (2020)

It is highly unlikely that a posture of isolationism and lack of international collaboration will help us overcome the challenges ahead. And so, it is important to prepare for these challenges, to consider some of the potential pitfalls they may bring, and to formulate strategies to address them. In the online intercultural teaching space, there are any number of pitfalls, but two stand out as highly problematic, but also avoidable—othering and dehumanisation.

CHALLENGES: OTHERING AND DEHUMANISATION

The transition to online or “blended” teaching entails many challenges in the tertiary education space. In this brief, we focus on those challenges that emerge in online intercultural interactions. These online challenges often parallel those challenges educators encounter in face-to-face classroom interactions. For instance, educators at the tertiary education level are experts in their fields, but their field is rarely intercultural communication (Singh 2013, 191). Therefore, communicating their expertise to a cohort of culturally diverse students is often difficult (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). Cultural diversity is rarely considered in the delivery of content or the design and review of assessment at the tertiary level (Hannon and D’Netto 2007). Yet, it is well-established that a student’s cultural background influences classroom engagement and learning. For instance, the “linear” rhetorical style of Australian essay/presentation style may challenge or confuse overseas students from non-Anglo backgrounds (Bowe, Martin and Manns 2014). Cultural differences in teacher-student interactions, classroom expectations and even email greetings may lead to misunderstandings (Hiraga, Fujii and Turner 2003; Merrison, Wilson, Davies & Haugh 2012). Cultural diversity may even impact the preference for communication technologies. Duranti and de Almeida (2012) examined a US/Brazilian IT collaboration, and found that Americans preferred email and chat over video-/tele-conferencing for decision-making, whereas the Brazilians preferred the opposite. Ultimately, intercultural communication remains a challenge in the higher education sector. Moreover, it has become increasingly problematic with a steady transition to online teaching—further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this briefing document, we focus on what is perhaps the best known, and potentially the most damaging impediment to intercultural communication—othering and de-humanisation (Moncada Linares 2016). We show in the first instance how othering and de-humanisation emerge as problematic for successful intercultural communication, and in the second instance how these processes are accelerated online. In her article, “Discursive Discrimination: A Typology”, where she discusses the different ways in which language can be used to discriminate, Kristina Boréus presents a comprehensive definition of “othering”, one that is particularly germane to intercultural communication. According to Boréus:

“The basis of othering is that differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ are pointed out, constructed or given weight... Othering is a matter of degree. The very making of a distinction between ‘us’ and those who are not ‘us’ could be seen as the first step. When the degree of othering is low, those ‘others’ are felt to be rather like us, fairly close. When the degree is higher, they are considered to differ from ‘us’ in important ways.” (Boréus 2006, 420)

As Boréus points out, “othering is a matter of degree”, and it can escalate from something as seemingly simple and innocuous as identifying differences that may not equate to power differentials between groups (e.g.: our class is at 9:00am and yours is at 11:00), to the full blown, dehumanisation of people. In this regard, Jensen’s approach to the term is of importance. Jensen refers to othering in relation to hierarchies of power. According to him, through othering,

“powerful groups, who may or may not make up a numerical majority, define subordinate groups into existence in a reductionist way which ascribes problematic and/or inferior characteristics to these subordinate groups.

Such discursive processes affirm the legitimacy and superiority of the powerful and condition identity formation among the subordinate.” (2011, 65)

This process of ascribing “problematic or inferior characteristics” to subordinate groups is at the heart of dehumanisation. “You” are different from “us”, and therefore, you are “less”: less legitimate, less valid, less human. This is, of course, an extreme, but one that as Stanton argues (1996), is easy to fall into when the conditions are ripe. In his article on the sociolinguistic characteristics of gossip, Joseph makes an argument on how individuals or groups can be othered through what he terms “language gossiping”. According to Joseph, when language gossiping takes place, “the other is ‘alienated’, in the sense of ‘alienism’ which psychologists use to describe long discarded approaches that conceived of mental patients as not quite human. Such divisions have proven to be powerful and durable, difficult to uproot.” (2013, 184) Again, Joseph is pointing out the potential for dehumanisation when othering occurs, this perception that the person with whom one is dealing is not “quite human.” Problems of intercultural communication are often exacerbated in the online space, and this is particularly the case with othering. Across contexts, the use of online tools—while convenient—can have a negative impact on how people view and interact with one another. For instance, Canada’s immigration authority has held refugee appeal proceedings through teleconferencing. Researchers reviewed these teleconferences, and found that participants were less likely to trust or understand one another than they might in face to face proceedings (Federman 2006).

Moreover, in these online proceedings, participants showed a propensity to lie more, and showed less of an ability to detect lies. This was in part because differences in, and the ability to assess, non-verbal cues was exacerbated, but also because the power imbalance between the judge and the judged were heightened by the former’s greater familiarity with the technology. In medical contexts, those attending a teleconference were more likely than in-person attendees to assess information’s validity and value based on the likability of the speaker rather than the quality of the information (Ferran and Watts 2008). Such issues feed into “othering”, and are not unlike those issues we encounter in online learning environments (Phirangee & Malec 2017; Sherblom 2010). Clare Kramsch (2009) posits that genre boundaries are reduced or muted in online learning environments, and there may be a presumption of similarity or even universality among participants. In other words, in online learning environments, one is more likely to presume than that the Other is like oneself, and so expects that the Other will behave like oneself. When these presumptions are not met, and the Other behaves differently, or expresses different views, online aggravation and miscommunication often result (Anderson and Corbett 2013). O’Dowd (2016), reviewing Kramsch and colleagues, highlights the need to guide students away from these presumptions, and toward a greater awareness of the diverse cultures and histories of individual students brought together to collaborate in the online environment.

So-called “Zoom fatigue” hints at another key source of othering: we feel a significant cognitive burden trying to make sense of what people—especially strangers—are trying to communicate online. This is because, among other things, we have reduced access to non-verbal cues. Moreover, some lecturers or students might get upset if they perceive a message isn’t being conveyed clearly. For instance, Singh (2013) points out it is common to see issues of linguistic proficiency (or non-standard language uses) by second-language speakers. In a face-to-face setting, when these usages lead to intelligibility issues, misunderstandings can be identified, addressed and negotiated in classroom interactions.

However, when the non-verbal cues that would often help us decode cultural differences are not present, this increases the possibility of miscommunication dramatically (Singh, 2013, 185-191; Sherblom, 2010, 500). As an example, haptics and proxemics, the languages of touch and personal space respectively, are two important elements of intercultural communication that vanish when we transition to the online space (emojis are not always available in every platform, and they are still a lacking, imperfect substitute). This is even in a “best case” scenario of synchronous videoconferencing, where body language and facial gestures may still be, to an extent, discernible. But if an interlocutor’s bandwidth is unstable, or their camera not working, those para-communicative aids are lost too, to the detriment of the intercultural communication process. As Phirangee and Malec argue, this “restricts social information about individuals, leaves online learners with unclear impressions of other students, allows for biased interpretations, and leads to less self-reflective communication” (2017). Even something as small as a transmission delay may lead to negative evaluations of an online interlocutor as being less attentive or conscientious (Schoenberg, Raake and Koeppel 2014).

In sum, Othering and the potential for dehumanising are challenges in face-to-face intercultural communication, and these challenges are exacerbated in the online teaching space. Thus, it is of the utmost important to mitigate these challenges in our classes, especially during the COVID-19 crisis. Not only are we increasingly transitioning to online learning, our students are likely impacted by the consequences of this crisis in their daily lives. For instance, extensive research has shown that economic downturns are accompanied by spikes in racism and xenophobia (Johnston and Lordan 2016; Ghosh 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic is already having devastating consequences for economies around the world, and most indicators suggest that this economic impact will worsen in the coming years. Therefore, there will be a heightened potential for othering and dehumanisation both off- and online, and we have an obligation to do what we can to mitigate this process in our online classes. Awareness about humanising intercultural education in the online space is more crucial than ever, and the remainder of this brief suggests three key ways we might do this: Self introductions/cultural awareness, collaborative learning and teleconferencing.

Best Practice Strategies for Humanising Online Intercultural Interactions: Self introductions and Cultural Awareness, Collaborative Learning, and Video conferencing.

SELF INTRODUCTIONS AND CULTURAL AWARENESS ACTIVITIES

The meeting of diverse student populations presents a powerful opportunity for openly engaging with otherness, and, in the longer term, reducing prejudices. However, the teacher plays a critical role in laying the foundations for this engagement, and avoiding the pitfalls of Othering and de-humanisation as discussed above (O’Dowd 2016).

As noted above, the teacher must find innovative ways to make a student cohort aware of the diversity of values, views and communicative practices of the diverse student population in a non-controversial way—in essence, to forge common ground. Djenaar, Ewing and Manns (2018, 3), reviewing Clark (1996), say of common ground:

“Common ground...informs how, and the degree to which, speakers and communities can successfully interact. Shared cultural models informed by collective beliefs and values...provide the common ground or reference point for interpreting and utterance in order to identify intended social actions (e.g. a request, a playful insult) from the semiotic resources used to accomplish those actions (e.g., person reference terms, interactional particles)”

Many strategies have been identified for establishing common ground, bringing cultural models to the fore, and facilitating the development of intercultural competency in online settings. Shadieff and Sintawati review some of the most frequently used activities for online teaching of intercultural communication, and find that self-introductions and cultural awareness activities (which may involve introductions to local culture, cultural knowledge or reflections on learning experiences) are the most frequently used activities (2020, 11). Although this is not specifically identified by Shadieff and Sintawati, literature suggests the reason these strategies are so effective at teaching intercultural cohorts is that highlighting the individual histories, values and practices of diverse student populations chips away at the sort presumed “universality” of participants in online learning environments (e.g. Kramsch 2009; O’Dowd 2016). Such activities enable students—and even teaching staff—to understand how living and learning in a different cultural context may have led to different beliefs, values and ways of communicating (O’Dowd, 2016).

The value of introductions and cultural awareness activities persists as a key observation from those working in, and researching, the online learning environment (see McDonough & Foote 2015; Schreiber & Valle 2013; Kumi-Yeboah 2020). Kumi-Yeboah argues that self-introductions and cultural awareness activities are particularly effective not only at helping students understand one another, but also promoting intercultural interactions amongst the students and educators (2020, 192). He echoes points made by Kramsch (2009), O’Dowd (2016) and other scholars that these activities are useful intercultural enhancers because they allow students to “become aware of their peers’ backgrounds and the experiences that they bring to the online learning environment”, which can help inform the way students interact with each other, as well as how educators can design their online teaching environments with intercultural diversity in mind (Kumi-Yeboah 2020, 192). In sum, for our students to relate to one another, and to move past the presumed universality of participants in the online environment, educators have an obligation to humanise the experience. Educators can do this by foregrounding the common ground of students’ shared humanity, but also that experiential diversity is a component of that humanity (cf. Linell 2014).

The integration of cultural diversity activities needn’t be that different from what educators are already doing. Many if not most educators already do self-introductions as straightforward ice breakers in class. These traditional methods have been as simple as students saying their names in front of a group. However, these exercises can easily be adapted with little elaboration to give them an intercultural awareness focus (Shadieff & Sintawati 2020). This can be particularly useful for courses that are not about intercultural communication. In addition to stating their names, students can succinctly share “their cultural backgrounds with peers, particularly, what is shaped by their cultural heritage and upbringing, including language and experience” (Kumi-Yeboah 2020, 188). Chen and Yang, for example, conducted a study where students briefly shared folktales that showcased what the students considered to be representative elements of their culture, such as values or traditions.

In Chen and Yang's activity, these brief presentations were followed by conversations amongst students where they could discuss doubts and answer questions, clarify any misconceptions, in an open, informal setting (2014). Some intercultural communication scholars argue for the value of "rich points" in cultural awareness activities (Anderson and Corbett 2013). These are subtle and even unspoken points of difference in the beliefs, attitudes and practices of one group or another. Rich points include the discussion of seemingly mundane topics like, what does it mean to be middle class in one culture or the other; how does one host a guest in your culture?; what is mealtime like in one's culture? Xu and Sharifian (2017) outline how even basic discussions of food, relationships or even a single word (e.g. "face") might lead to a greater understanding of Chinese cultural diversity.

Self-introductions and cultural awareness forge common ground, but also pre-empt conflict. Pre-empting conflict is an excellent strategy for humanising intercultural interactions in diverse teams. This is something discussed in depth by Ginka Toegel and Jean-Louis Barsoux in their research on how to address conflict in diverse teams (2016). According to Toegel and Barsoux, conflict in teams does not occur because of differences between team members, but because of a "perceived incompatibility" amongst those differences (2016, 81). People often revert to stereotyping and Othering when they encounter unanticipated responses, practices or viewpoints (see Comstock 2015), and this may lead to conflict. Toegel and Barsoux argue that taking a proactive approach to pre-empting these conflicts before they take place is much more efficient than managing conflict once it occurs. Understanding the roots of these perceived incompatibilities, often grounded in our world views and the assumption that others share those views, when they often do not, is the catalyst for humanising cultural differences, as those differences are clarified and demystified. As we have noted throughout this section, this is precisely what the self-introduction and cultural awareness activities mentioned above do: creating common ground in the sense of knowledge of cultural models. This common ground provides the foundations for our online learners to start understanding and addressing differences and/or perceived incompatibilities that may arise due to cultural differences in interaction.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

In addition to self-introductions and cultural awareness exercises, collaborative learning is another effective strategy in online intercultural teaching spaces, one that, albeit, has received less attention. Since at least the 1950s, it has been acknowledged that merely bringing diverse populations together is not enough to mitigate or prevent prejudices or Othering (O'Dowd 2016). Moreover, foregrounding cultural knowledge through introductions and cultural awareness activities will only go so far. Djenar et al. (2018, 3) write "while common ground provides a basis for interaction, it is also through interaction that common ground can be negotiated and expanded".

Cultural knowledge is one aspect of intercultural communication, but interactional, strategic competence is another (Dooley 2016). In education, O'Dowd points out that Othering and prejudices may be reduced by bringing students together around a common goal or joint activity. Collaborative learning outside of the online space has been shown to be an excellent vehicle for deep learning, promoting "critical thinking to master core academic content and solve complex problems" (Kumi-Yeboah 2018).

Research has shown that collaborative learning can also make online learning proactive, and at times more effective than face-to-face learning (Hiltz & Turoff, 2002; Turoff, Hiltz, Li, Wang, & Cho, 2004). Yamazaki and Kayes argue that collaborative learning that takes place within culturally diverse groups, when properly facilitated, can be conducive to significant improvements in intercultural competency (2004). This is because collaborative learning promotes the development of interpersonal skills that are not only transferable, but crucial, to effective intercultural communication, such as building relationships, listening and observing, coping with ambiguity, and translating complex information (2004, 276). Significantly, collaborative learning requires mutual understanding of each other's needs and perspectives, and the creation of a "space" where students feel comfortable and safe to communicate with each other.

In the online environment, a well-designed collaborative project may help to reduce perceived distance between students, and help them to establish best-practice in terms of relationships, interactions and technological tools. The role of the teacher and the design of the collaborative task is critical to its success (O'Dowd 2016). Ultimately, the role of the teacher increases rather than decreases in the online environment (at least at first). Students must be provided with a clear task, a common objective, and the task must assure they need to depend on one another to complete the task (e.g. interviews with one another, a jointly edited text) (O'Dowd 2016). Students should be provided some leverage within the activity to choose how to interact and through what technology (Nissen 2016). This will enable students to establish best practice for themselves (relative to their knowledge), but also for the emergence of certain "digital natives" or "expert students" within the environment. Within the online environment, technical competence can be as important as topical knowledge/competence (see Pasfield-Neofitou 2013), and these students can be valuable to peers (and even lecturers) within the online learning environment. In some contexts, "expert students" have returned to the university after their course finishes to conduct joint research (with lecturers) on best practice in the online environment (Osini-Jones and Lee 2018). They base this research in part on education theory, and part on their own experiences.

VIDEO CONFERENCING

The use of video technologies is proving more and more valuable in online intercultural education. While it might seem new to many lecturers, the value of video-conferencing is already well-established in online learning environments (e.g. Dooley 2016; Lenkaitis, Calo and Escobar 2019; Ozcelic & Paprika 2010). For some years, the use of different video technologies has become increasingly frequent in online learning spaces for language and intercultural education (Kumi-Yeboah 190; Shadiev, Sintawati 2020; Chen & Yang, 2014; Hsu & Beasley, 2019). Shadiev and Sintawati note in particular that videoconferencing is the most frequently used technology and that "the slope of the trend in its usage was increasing" exponentially, this was even before its explosion in 2020 due to the pandemic (2020, 11). This is not surprising. As opposed to email (also very frequently), and discussion boards, videoconferencing allows synchronous, immediate communication between students and educators (Jin, 2015), which often results in better, more efficient interaction (Lee & Markey, 2014), and more robust, complex conversations (Yang, Yu, Chen, & Huang, 2014). Our hypothesis is that the effectiveness of videoconferencing in intercultural education is in large part because it provides the closest semblance of human contact in our online interactions. Through videoconferencing we are not only able to speak to someone in real time, but also read their facial expressions, their body language, how they present themselves in a more "holistic" sense. Even if someone is videoconferencing without a video, using audio alone, it is often possible to share a picture of oneself.

SUMMARY

This research brief sets out the dangers of “othering” and “de-humanisation”, and how these processes may be exasperated in online learning environments. Educators play an important role in mitigating these practices, and this brief has suggested three key ways in which they might do this: self-introductions/cultural awareness; collaborative learning and teleconferencing. While the nuances of online learning may seem new to some educators, work has been ongoing in this sphere for nearly 30 years now. An introduction to this work may be found in collections such as Sharifian and Jamarani (2013) and Lewis and O’Dowd (2016). We recommend these, and other scholars cited in this brief for further reading. Ultimately, the role of the educator has grown rather than shrunk in the transition to online learning. However, it is our position that facilitative work early in a unit or course (e.g. introductions/cultural awareness), well-planned and focused collaborative activities, and the efficient use of established technologies like tele-conferencing, will make the educator’s job easier, and enhance the online experience of our students.

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