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Towards intercultural learning *PERMIT's learned lessons and the future*

In the context of globalization, as we have demonstrated in this case study so far, intercultural education is receiving much interest. Connected to this, there has been a raising number of cultural studies, cross cultural approaches, as well as interventions to promote intercultural dialogue as part of a new mode of thinking education for the multiethnic society. In fact, culture has become an instrument for social interpretation and communicative action. As it has been emphasised in this book, the main goal of intercultural education is seen as the development of intercultural competence, which is the ability to act and relate appropriately and effectively in various cultural contexts. Intercultural competence is generally thought to require three components on the learner's side: a certain skillset, culturally sensitive knowledge, and a motivated mindset. In greater detail, the skills, values, and attitudes that constitute intercultural competence include

- intercultural attitudes (like openness, curiosity, readiness);
- general knowledge (of the theoretical aspects of how social groups/products/practices work and interact);
- skills of interpreting and relating (like making comparisons from one culture to another);
- skills of discovery and interaction (like the ability to discover information about another culture and the ability to communicate in real-time interaction);
- critical cultural awareness (like being able to consider different cultures coexisting with one's own).

The teacher's task is to support the learner in all these aspects; if the teacher (and the learning environment) succeeds, intercultural learning generate culturally competent learners.

In the context of intercultural education, our ex-cursus have led us to recognize the importance of being aware of different subcategories of culture, namely, "little c" and "big C" culture. While the latter one could be called "objective culture" or "formal culture" referring to institutions, big figures in history, literature, etc., the first one, the "subjective culture", is concerned with the less tangible aspects of a culture, like everyday patterns. In intercultural education, a mixture of these two forms of culture to be employed, but it is especially the apprehension of subjective culture that triggers the development of intercultural competence.

Now this takes us to think carefully about the teachers' actions: as we have highlighted in the first chapters in this volume, pedagogical practices have been frequently linked to the idea of transmission of knowledge, and the consequent development of cognitive skills by the students. The point here emerging clearly is how the teacher can enact learning processes that, being significative and authentic (from a constructivist point of view) can stimulate such a subjective and deep dimensions of the above mentioned subjective culture (little c).

Intercultural education requires educators to reflect to employ a mix of "little culture" and "big-Culture" approaches in order to address the larger issues of ethnocentrism, cultural self-awareness, because intercultural competence cannot be achieved by the single acquisition of knowledge about a specific culture or the pure ability to behave properly in that culture.

The idea that "(big) Culture" repeats itself, commonly taken as a statement about historical determinism, emerges frequently within liberal discourses when consensus fails, and when the consequences of cultural incommensurability make social contexts unbearable for those trying to live within them. At such moments, the past is seen as returning dressed as the Culture, as a "patrimony" of knowledge, representations, values, beliefs, that make the people feel confident with their realities of meaning and their interpretation. The narrative proposed by the Culture seems to be transparent and lineal.

The redefinition of nationalism, the claim for ethnicity and race, the idea of "national" identities and its institutions, take us to see just a Narrative of what has been the social engine of nineteenth century.

Underlying the signs of Culture shows the anxieties that provoke the same destruction of that ideals, the age of "identities and narratives", the age of "cultures".

As Bhabba says:

"...Narratives of historical reconstruction may reject (...) myths of social transformation: communal memory may seek its meanings through the sense of causality shared with psychoanalysis, that negotiates the recurrence of the image of the past while keeping open to the question of the future. The importance of such retroaction lies in its ability to reinscribe the past, reactivate it, resignify it. More significant, it commits our understanding of the past, and our reinterpretation of the future, to an ethics of survival that allows us to work through the present. And such a working through, or working out, frees us from the determinism of historical inevitability, repetition without difference..." (Bhabba, 1996, p. 60).

This means that teachers and their students (and all the actors involved in a determined educational space) are to consider themselves as part of laboratories of culture, not as transmitters of the Culture, but as creators of cultures, collective narratives that give shape to the personal narratives, becoming hence inclusive spaces.

This multi-voiced systems of human activity, as pointed out by Minello and Raffaghelli (on the basis of Margiotta's concept of educational space), are the engine of engagement, participation and inclusion. An inclusion that cannot wait longer, if we take into account the problem (and also the richness) of the second generations. As Lazzari puts we still see approaches of permanent discrimination, especially in

Europe (US, Canadian and Australian contexts are proven more welcoming with regard to the permanent settlement of immigrants; Sweden is an exception in Europe) being the persistent discrimination of the children of immigrants in the work environment and the environment of education and training. Second generations aspire to social roles and positions coherent with their education and training paths. Assimilation, as acculturation behaviour, implies the choice of not maintaining one's own culture of origin and to favour frequent contact with the hosting culture, and other groups that are in the environment.

We have also discussed here (Richieri; Raffaghelli and Minello) how teachers need to be prepared to tackle with such a complex learning process. It's not only about creating learning environments, but rather the creation of "enlarged" spaces that, starting from the own teachers' beliefs, supporting operations of deconstruction and reconstruction of meaning.

Teachers need to become aware of the importance of managing complexity induced by diversity at any level of learning experience. Teachers' effectiveness depends on this awareness, which can generate appropriate educational actions.

Considering the positive impact on intercultural sensitivity generated by the PERMIT project by spreading international residential seminars blended with networked learning over rather long periods of time, similar experiences should be shared and disseminated, in order to let new teachers know the educational gains brought about by meeting otherness on the Net, and promote their participation in similar activities. Furthermore, academics, researchers and teacher trainers should help them investigate their own disciplines' epistemology in international networked learning activities both as pre-service and in-service training opportunities in which teachers can reflect on their discipline's dimensions that can be affected by intercultural sensitivity and competence.

For example, the European Commission is providing a policy context to promote teachers' professional mobility (Comenius Projects: Lifelong Learning Programme, Strategic Priorities, 2010). Thus, introducing a perspective such as the one explored in this volume, can certainly improve dimensions of teachers' professionalism, by creating intercultural environments for teachers' professional development.

Future research has several areas to explore in order to develop an intercultural approach to education. Just but examples are the reflection brought by anthropology and cultural studies to education, the pedagogical reflection on learning processes in multiethnic classrooms, the analysis of teachers' professional learning; not to emphasize the important role of coherent research methods about such a complex field of educational research.

The agenda should take into account an approach that goes from the "technicalities" of teaching and training methods, to study learning outcomes, the emerging identities, and productions in hybrid learning communities.

From the other hand, it is interesting to explore the use of resources and tools, understanding learners and educators' behaviors with regard to several "mediators" of learning as part of cultural constructions. Cultural meaning attached to tools (learning resources, spaces, interactions, within activity systems,

as explained by Raffaghelli and Minello), could encompass a wide range of user's reactions, being them also holders of a cultural perspective. For example, the use of technologies or technological devices, as well as the use of certain literary or art works could trigger very different reactions by the students coming from diverse experience. Future research should hence explore those reactions, in order to find, together with teachers, the better strategies to enact reflections with students that encompass critical positioning, inclusion, and the openness to remix and create new resources.

However, whatever was the direction into which research about intercultural education did develop, researchers should consider a position as someone who have an ethnographic involvement within the communities being studied. It is a key implication that involves the deconstruction of the researchers' position as representatives of the hegemonic culture that is frequently taught in class (this also applies to the centrality of language, that was not specifically treated in the PERMIT case). Such research perspectives, in line with a constructionist view, should incorporate "insider" views. This means that projects intending to research the construction of enlarged cultural contexts of learning should not be conducted entirely from an *etic* perspective, that is to say, entirely by researchers who share a particular cultural perspective and who are looking from outside. Projects should, in our view, be conducted by teams, which are themselves culturally diverse, for whom the construction of their own learning culture would be an acknowledgement outcome of research. This *emic* perspective was, within PERMIT study, foreseen, but never implemented completely; furthermore, this should be an important concern, considering the important raise of international cooperation in education, launched for example through the Lifelong Learning Programme in Europe.

It does occur within all the developed countries' societies that classrooms are constituted by an increasing number of immigrants; it also happen that learning communities are extended to several scenarios, by the use of Information and Communication Technologies. Hence, teachers and learners are already engaged in big "laboratories" of culture, that need urgently the sensitivity and intelligence of interventions aimed to explore and discover the richness of this spaces. This could be recognized as a one of the key competences for Lifelong Learning (European Commission, 2006), that of cultural awareness and expression, as the base for a new model of human development. The educational dispositive of the PERMIT project, could just be considered one case among others, towards the exploration of significant instruments to promote such *awareness and expression*.

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THE INSPIRING IDEA

The **Interuniversity Centre for Education Research and Advance Training** started out when the 4 Universities of Veneto decided to grant a unitary benchmark to research on learning and teaching and also on continuous and advanced education of teachers and school personnel

- University of Ca'Foscari in Venice,
- IUAV University in Venice,
- University of Padua;
- University of Verona;
- Interuniversity Specialisation School for Secondary School Teachers' training of Veneto (SSIS).

The Veneto Region and the Regional School Bureau are also invited to join in.

The idea that inspired the constitution of this centre is tightly bound to the chance to promote:

- The **development of learning research and advanced education**;
- The **scientific collaboration between the teachers and researchers** of the Universities of Veneto and the Veneto School to grant high quality teaching and learning;
- The **active involvement of other important stakeholders** of the educational system and, more generally, of the local systems in Veneto.

THE MAIN BODIES OF THE CENTRE

The Centre's bodies are:

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University of Ca' Foscari: Prof. Umberto Margiotta; Prof. Paolo Balboni

SSIS: Prof. Carmelo Majorana, Prof. Ester Piccinni, Prof. Ferdinando Luigi Marcolungo

- **The President:** s/he is elected by the Management Committee and the chancellor of the university where the administrative offices of the Centre are located. S/he chairs the Committee itself and the Council and also supervises its scientific activities;

The Presidente elected for the three-year period 2009-2012 is Prof. Umberto Margiotta.

- **The Council:** It helps the President in working out proposals for action in the fields of competence of the Committee and in the Implementation of the Deliberations of the Committee.

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The Council's members are the President, the Vice President, the Head of SSIS or a delegate and the three section managers chosen among the members of the Management Committee.

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