

## Intercultural activities: building trust and reciprocity among Greek teachers

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper provides some insights regarding the adoption of intercultural reflective and narrative activities during intercultural training of 90 teachers. It introduces two activities modified to build trust in intercultural learning environments. The purpose of both activities was to ascertain whether and how reflective and narrative activities could contribute to the improvement of trust in “educating the other”. The effectiveness of these activities was justified by the Narrative inquiry adopted. Qualitative data comprised of researchers’ observation and participants’ feedback (field notes).*

### KEYWORDS

*Intercultural activities, reflection, narratives, transformative learning*

### RÉSUMÉ

*Cet article fournit quelques idées concernant l’adoption des activités interculturelles réfléchissantes et narratives au cours de la formation interculturelle de 90 professeurs. Elle introduit deux activités modifiées pour renforcer la confiance dans des environnements d’apprentissage interculturel. Ces deux activités visait à déterminer si et comment les activités réflexive et narratives pourraient contribuer à l’amélioration de la confiance dans l’éducation « de l’autre ». L’efficacité de ces activités était justifiée par l’enquête Narrative adoptée. Données qualitatives composées d’observation de chercheurs et de la rétroaction des participants (notes de terrain).*

### MOTS-CLÉS

*Activités interculturelles, réflexion, récits, apprentissage transformatif*

## INTRODUCTION

Global transformations and interconnectivity require people with diverse skills, sensibilities, and habits of mind. Superficial multicultural coexistence is not enough. It gives its way to intercultural approaches that attempt to promote human understanding and collaborative action through dialogue and exchange. Effective interaction with people of different cultural and social backgrounds requires intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes such as: awareness of the cultural self, knowledge and understanding of one's own/others' culture, curiosity, observation, openness, ability to listen and sharing as well as cooperation, acceptance, empathy and congruence (Manavi, 2014a, p. 49; Portera, 2014).

In addition, educational contexts reflect cultural pluralism. Children experience ambiguity by taking part in diverse social and cultural interactions in their everyday life. Intercultural encounters are present and children come to terms with a whole range of inter-exchanges positive or negative according to their own cultural baggage. The *other* is constantly present in media metaphors and in everyday habits, whereas the status of culturally different students seems quite adverse in an international scale (Bikos, 2008; Tsironis, 2008). Teachers' response is vital in terms of establishing a trustful learning environment that maintain high academic expectations for all students. Building friendly intercultural learning environments cements social inclusion and cooperation with *others*. Teachers' efficacy nowadays is measured by their ability to help learners to feel confident entering into productive work with diverse *others*. The co-understanding of individual roles and their functionality in diverse contexts may lead the way to deepen interaction and decisively influence the process of shaping personal identity and strengthen collaborative ethos (Tsironis, 2008).

School communities produce an enriched intercultural capital (Pöllmann, 2009) through the intersection of everyday differences. The intentional use of this capital would enable students to acquire a set of viable skills for the future. To do so, it requires an inclusive and transformative intercultural approach of diversity focussing on participatory, bias-free and open-minded practices (Kesidou, 2008). In addition, it requires, *culturally responsive* teachers who are able to take on an expanded role as facilitators, transformation leaders (*change agents*) and critical thinkers (Arvanitis, 2013, 2017). This role can be secured via enhanced teachers' professional learning, which involves diversified methods, action research and design of intercultural activities (Zarifis, 2009).

This paper provides some insights on the implementation of intercultural reflective and narrative activities during the intercultural training of 90 teachers. It introduces two activities modified to build trust in intercultural learning environments. The effectiveness of these activities was justified by researchers' observation and participants' feedback (field notes), in an attempt to find out whether and how these activities could contribute to the improvement of trust in "educating the other". Narrative inquiry was adopted supplemented by a concise documentation and analysis about the outcomes of each activity.

## INTERCULTURAL REFLECTIVE AND NARRATIVE ACTIVITIES

Teachers are responsible to organize learners' social interaction in securing reciprocity, mutual respect, collaborative ethos and consensus. Collaborative learning requires activities that organize diverse social interaction and transform learners. This includes reflective action and group activities that create opportunities for cultural contact. Exchanging information about linguistic

and cultural differences as well as diverse skills, values, feelings and ways of thinking cultivate self-motivated and creative thinking learners (Karakatsani, 2003; Tsironis 2008). This sharing empowers learners to understand diversity and develop empathy (Tsironis, 2008). In this context, reflection is crucial in fostering intercultural understanding, trust and reciprocity. Reflection is a fundamental foundation of intercultural competence and it is a process that develops self-examination, openness and transformation of values and attitudes (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). Enriched intercultural encounters can offer a learning milieu of reflection and reciprocal learning or a space where learners can obtain and negotiate meaningful knowledge of themselves and *others*. Reflection is a valuable habit of meaning construction on one's experiences (roles, actions, complexities and worldviews). Its usefulness is apparent in pedagogy as it develops balanced judgements, transferable skills and contextual thinking among teachers and learners (Arvanitis, 2016). Finlay (2008) has noted that teachers' reflective practice "is understood as the process of learning through and from experience towards gaining new insights of self and/or practice". This means that knowledge professionals explore "assumptions of everyday practice", critically evaluate "their own responses to practice situations" and develop self-awareness so to improve their future practice (Finlay, 2008, p. 1).

Reflective activities help to foster a *collective intelligence* of discussing and explaining facts as well as *symbolic, material* and *corporal* differences (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012), stereotypes and misconceptions. When learners embark in a self-reflection journey they become accustomed to transformation taking up a comfort zone challenge. This challenge is grounded on a constant border crossing and reflection upon both personal prior experiences or underlying assumptions and new learning. Learners withhold judgment when dealing with new intercultural learning, namely new practices and perspectives. They also become accustomed to comprehend positionality and multiple perspectives. The analysis and interpretation of differences creates a vivid learning habit able to stimulate self-understanding, intercultural competency, reflective thinking and efficacy in communication. By challenging their cultural baggage with new learning, learners are empowered to better understand their worldviews and counteract stereotypes.

Furthermore, effective reflection is embedded in intercultural encounters and collective learning. Global interconnectness bring people in contact with diverse *others* in their everyday life. Cultural awareness and intercultural competences are necessary conceptions as people come across diverse and complex situations. Even more, collective sharing of thoughts and insights may lead to meaningful interaction. In this context, action-oriented activities, stimulating questions and reflective moments enable participants to adopt a more critical and deeper understanding of their world (Arvanitis, 2016). Collaboration and peer learning may well pave the way for developing a trustful learning environment. Trust is an essential feeling for participants enabling effective learning as it signifies safety to express one's mind and to engage in a dialogue with openness, honesty and respect. Enhancing teachers' self-confidence and ability to build trustful intercultural classrooms is of paramount importance for the teaching profession (Davis & Rinvolducry, 1990). This could also be secured through active professional learning and the use of narratives.

The narrative approach is not simply a practical guide on how to work with individuals or groups. It appears as a way of thinking and viewing social phenomena and individuals into them. Narrative learning builds on knowledge about learning as in real world including experiential learning, constructivism, situated learning and a critical cultural perspective on learning. In short, narrative learning bridges the gap between experiential learning and making sense and seeks to help people get in touch with what is important for them in their lives. In teaching practice, it

helps teachers and learners realise their experiences in two ways. Firstly, through interviewing techniques and conversations. Secondly, through a range of playful possibilities, it assists people to change their reactions to problems that affect their lives (De Groot, 2015). Narrative activities help participants to understand that there are impacts on what they value in their every day life.

Narratives result meaningful learning through stories. It is a holistic and multifaceted sense-making reception process involving identity narration and cognition. Telling of stories transforms people into actors and knowledge producers as they interpret their experiences and worldviews through cognitive schemas and cultural lenses. When individual experiences are evoked and discussed in a collective milieu, sharing stories becomes a powerful tool of learning and belonging. This is because narrative situatedness creates the possibility for reflecting on and questioning own assumptions. Overall, narrative learning opens new possibilities as it helps people to conceptualize their experiences and own learning process. We learn something new by developing a story. In fact, we narrativizing our understanding to make this new learning coherent and visible to ourselves. At the same time we situate this learning within its context by trying to explain how we make sense of the world (Fenwick, 2000). Narrative sharing in pedagogic encounters results powerful learning through construction, swapping and reflecting on stories, and thus, leading to meaningful change and development for individuals and groups (Goodson et al., 2010). Teacher training provides an appropriate framework to apply intercultural narrative activities as it is described bellow.

## METHOD

This study has adopted the *narrative inquiry* (Clandinin & Huber, 2010) trying to understand teachers' experiences as they were told narratively during a training session. The documentary analysis consisted of narrations about information and moments in participants life, important for understanding who they are. Data was comprised of field notes, audio recordings, teachers' storytelling and reflections as well as observation made by the researchers. More specifically, 90 teachers participated in a training seminar on refugee education at the University of Patras. Through 'learning by doing', they were challenged to critically reflect on two activities: a) *The Tree of Life*, derived from narrative approach in therapy, social work and education, and b) the activity *One Step Forward*, suggested by *Compass*, a guide of the Council of Europe that has become a reference manual for human rights education (Ncube, 2006, pp. 3-16; Denborough, 2008, p. 72; Council of Europe, 2012, p. 235). Both activities take advantage of diversity existed in learning environments. They utilise participants' cultural capital, awareness of cultural similarities, cultural embeddedness and multiple worldviews. Reciprocal understanding of diverse assumptions and previous experiences is central as it may lead to empathy, empowerment, dynamic exchange and self-awareness. Both activities enhanced narrative, reflection and dialogue aiming at common action and transformative learning.

More specifically, the activities were as follows:

- i) *Tree of Life*. This technique was co-developed through a partnership between Ncazelo Ncube (REPSSI) and David Denborough (Dulwich Centre Foundation), in order to assist colleagues who work with children affected by HIV/AIDS in southern Africa, and it has been applied to various vulnerable groups. The *Tree of Life* is an activity suitable when working with children and adults on identity issues, and personal development and empowerment. In our case, participants were invited to draw their own tree of life and explore their own cultural background. They were asked to reflect on "the ground", which symbolizes the opportunities

offered to them by their town and country; “the roots”, namely important *others* in the past, values, attitudes, sayings, beliefs, jobs, customs and daily life; “the trunk”, namely skills, knowledge and attitudes; “the brunches” (e.g. personal hopes, dreams, wishes, community goals); the “leaves” (significant *others* today, family, friends, teachers, pets); and “fruits”, “flowers” or “seeds” (e.g. life gifts, material or attributes given to them, but also life gifts teachers wish to pass on to their students). After completing their drawings teachers were invited to discuss first in small groups and subsequently with the whole group some of the stories that affect their personal reactions to differences. After sharing their stories teachers were asked to revisit their drawings and add any new thoughts or experiences.

*ii) Take a Step Forward.* Role play is one of the most appropriate transformative learning techniques when examining concepts in the context of learners’ real life (Axline, 1985). In this activity, 20 volunteers took part with the remaining teachers acting as observers. The volunteers were invited to pick up a role card without being able to disclose its content. The role could be that of an unemployed single mother; a president of a political youth organization; the daughter of a local bank manager who studies economics at the university; an Arab Muslim girl living with her parents who were devout and religious people; a 17-year-old Roma girl who never finished primary school; the owner of a successful import-export company; a disabled young man who can only move himself using a Wheelchair; the son of a Chinese immigrant who runs a successful fast food business; an HIV positive middle-aged prostitute and an illegal immigrant from Mali (Council of Europe, 2012, pp. 281-285). Teachers had to think some questions about the role and to build up a picture of themselves and their lives according to each role. These questions included what their childhood was like and what sort of houses they lived in. After reflecting on their role, volunteers were invited to remain silent in order to listen carefully to and line up beside each other. Then, the facilitator read statements one at a time from a list. For example, *You have never encountered any serious financial difficulty!; You feel your religion and culture are respected in the society where you live!; You can go away on holiday once a year!; You can invite friends for dinner at home!; You feel you can study and follow the profession of your choice!* and so on. Volunteers had to move and take a step forward every time they answered “yes” to a statement, otherwise, they could not move. When this activity stopped volunteers observed their current positions and the distance they had from each other. At that stage they were asked to tell the story about their role and the reasons why they did or they did not take a step forward. They had to talk about their thoughts, their observations, their feelings and the knowledge they obtained and other issues that could possibly come up through this activity. They were also invited to guess each other’s role and think critically about the relevance of statements and roles in real life. Furthermore, the 20 volunteers were invited to talk about the amount of information they had before the activity regarding the person they were supposed to perform and the relevance of the activity to their society and their own lives. They had to consider the stereotypical images they had of the roles represented, and to imagine what actions could be done from teachers in their classes as a first step to protect human rights (Council of Europe, 2012).

## FINDINGS - DISCUSSION

The purpose of *The Tree of Life* was for participants to understand better the role of personal experiences in the construction of identities, and also to alert them on the usefulness of narration, as a building trust process in interaction. All meaning making was embedded in teachers' ways of

making interpretations and narrations. Their stories were indicators of cultural values affecting their judgments. The *Tree of Life* represented the various parameters of teachers' lives such as events, memories, relevant information of identity and sociality. These parameters helped them rediscover important facts of their past, but also gain knowledge of their present and ideal future paths (Ncube, 2006; Denborough, 2008, 2014). Through verbal stimulation, asking, listening to and developing self-narratives, participants traveled to *other's* identity (values, skills, interests, desires), reality (relationships, environment, historical and ideological context) and actions (experiences, struggles, accomplishments, victories and failures). This was a *thinking together* act, which enhanced their *self-reflection* and sense of belonging (Arvanitis, 2016). Teachers worked in small groups in a supportive environment and this deepened their understanding. Most importantly, some of them felt comfortable enough to share with the whole group their intimate feelings and even information related to their identity. Participants interacted recalling and relating information. Many of them recalled things their *mom always said*. They also understood multiple interpretations of their reality and norms that influenced their choices. One stated “*I have just started painting courses. My teacher is a painter. You know, painting helped me to face my parents' divorce, when I was a child*”. Through this procedure they multiplied the possibilities to deconstruct information. They reflected on insights into own experiences, identities and knowledge and they get empowered to give new meaning to important aspects of their lives through developing their self-identity (Cummins, 1989; Chan, 2012; Manavi, 2014b).

Personal recollections were shared in the group. For example, many participants noted the most important ethical values for them and their student. *My mother used to say: Don't do to others what you don't want others do to you; My grandfather used to say: you should respect the elderly*. Participants had the opportunity to present their ideas, thoughts, and beliefs about important *others* in their life. *I used to admire my mother's brother. He's supposed to be the best educated person in our family. The only person who could help me with my math homework*”, said one teacher. Other important values came up, such as *acknowledgment, honesty, belonging, appreciation, hopefulness and humor*. One teacher noted that important virtue is to *not say lies...often I ask from my children to speak always the truth*. Other teachers talked about their dreams in front of their peers, and talked about themselves, *others* and social norms. Two participants realized that they had a common dream to participate in a humanitarian mission to Africa. *I am currently fighting for human rights. Going to Africa is my life dream*, said one of them. Participants also highlighted inequalities. Some of them had fewer chances or opportunities in education provision growing up in villages: *I grew up in a village without having the opportunity to attend foreign language lessons*, said one; *I didn't manage to learn music*, said another one; *My best dream was to become a dancer but I was growing up in a village*, concluded a third one. Inequalities also referred to gender issues or participation in political or social life. *In my village parents had different hopes and expectations for girls. Girls should get married*, said one teacher.

Overall, teachers, engaged in dialogic reflecting on underlying assumptions, feelings intentions and disputable views. Participants said that they do not usually talk about such controversial topics when they are with colleagues or friends. They felt that this activity could be very helpful to teach students about multiple identities and diversity. As participants told the researchers, this sharing of personal experiences was an act of mutual trust and collective thinking. This activity was pivotal to guide them in the process of giving meaning to their own culture and challenging their understanding of the *other*, namely their colleagues who they already knew, although not in such depth. Finally, they felt that this activity is easy enough to be implemented in their classes.

The *Take a Step Forward* activity enabled teachers to take on roles and move forward depending on their quality of life. Its scope was to reveal the lack of opportunities and related rights, such as the right to equality in dignity, the right to education and the right of living a healthy life. In particular, the activity made connections between civil, political and social, financial and cultural rights and accessibility to them. It aimed to help participants raise their awareness about inequality of opportunity, develop imagination and critical thinking and foster empathy to *others* who are less fortunate (Council of Europe, 2012). This activity was a team game providing a playful context for developing participants' inclinations, collaborative skills, confidence, self-motivation, creativity and optimism in a functional way.

In this role play participants were asked to examine certain situations and concepts in the context of their lives; explore the negative emotions that are caused by them; critically evaluate the assumptions that are associated with them; connect the discomfort that is caused by this situation with other people's experiences around them; cultivate their intuition and their imagination; think critically in terms of their role in relation to the issue; change their behavior; empower themselves; and integrate this activity and other relevant ones in their daily lives (Chan 2012; Manavi, 2016). Several participants realized the stereotypical images they had about roles represented in the activity. *It was difficult for me to imagine a Roma seventeen years old girl going to school instead of having a family already*, said one teacher. Another one pointed out, *first time in my life I realized that important or rich people feel insecurity and fear down the street*. Another one confessed that he *knew little about the life of the role-play I had to perform*. Others felt the same admitting that they were not sure about the character they had to describe as they had no reliable information and/or personal experience. Only one volunteer with personal experience in a local NGO admitted he had no problem impersonate a refugee. Participants felt that this activity mirrors society: *Usually winners in life step forward and they don't turn back, they don't care about others*, said one. Finally, one participant mentioned that the statement *you know where to turn for advice and help if you need it*, helped him realize that resolving some problems is very often a matter of effectively accessing appropriate information. *We as teachers and our pupils could help this groups of citizens through projects producing and sharing useful information about their rights*, he pointed out.

## CONCLUSION

Observation data and teacher reflections showed that both activities were successful in meeting their aims. The *Tree of Life* facilitated the development of sensitive relationships among participants and helped them to become active listeners in what their colleagues were saying. This was an activity that builded trust and increased confidence among them fostering a transformative stance. The second activity (*Take a step forward*) truly met its aims in terms of evoking awareness towards social justice and diversity. It empowered 20 volunteers and their observers to externalize their knowledge and emotions about inequalities and deprivation. The activity involved participant's imagination and promoted discovery learning on challenging topics, which hardly discussed with peers and in professional workplaces. It was a great opportunity for participants to collaboratively engage in such a discourse. Overall, most of participants gave positive feedback and responded with enthusiasm to both activities.

Intercultural reflective and narrative activities can create trustful training spaces for professionals. These environments allow individual and collective identities to emerge though functional group dynamics. In addition, these activities facilitate collaborative ethos through

reflection, narration, empathetic listening and mutual interaction. They help teachers to familiarise themselves with their colleagues' stories and encourage them to feel safe to share their own experiences, feelings and beliefs. By attending this type of training encounters themselves teachers can act as facilitators in their own classrooms, transforming their own practice. Intercultural narrative and reflective activities are effective tools of building trust in multicultural learning environments and may lead to transformation. This needs to be embraced and sustained by teachers in ways that prepare all children to benefit from diversity. Collective thinking, trust and reciprocal exchange could enable multicultural societies to answer appropriately current challenges. However, further research is required to document how intercultural activities which are based on narratives and reflection affect teachers' responsiveness in real class contexts.

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