

## **LEARNING CULTURAL SELF-UNDERSTANDING IN A WEB-BASED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

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### Abstract

The Internet and technology-based learning environments increase learners' opportunities for developing their cultural competence. Engaging in intercultural interaction and communicative learning provides students not only with new knowledge and skills but also with deeper understanding of their own cultural identity and background, which is regarded as an important element of (inter)cultural competence.

In this paper, a few theoretical and experience-based starting points are outlined for forthcoming research on learning of cultural self-understanding in an Internet-based environment. Cultural self-understanding is defined as a narrative form. Initial observations from two pilot courses are described.

**Keywords:** cultural self-awareness, intercultural competencies, e-learning/teaching, learning environments

### **Cultural self-understanding as an essential element of cultural competence**

Several researchers have acknowledged the importance of cultural self-understanding or self-awareness<sup>1</sup> in intercultural interaction and learning. Gertsen (1995) presumes that knowledge of one's own culture may be even a prerequisite for understanding another culture. Awareness of the influence of one's cultural background on one's behaviour, thoughts and feelings makes it easier to understand one's reactions when confronted with another culture. (313-314.) Also Aarup Jensen (1995) emphasises that increased awareness of one's cultural background is the first necessary step towards an understanding of and empathy with others. When a learner comes into contact with other cultures, the impact of cultural background can not be disregarded, but the learner inevitably makes comparisons on the basis of it. (35.) Anyone who believes his behaviour and thought patterns to be universal, is prone to make misinterpretations of actions determined by different cultural standards. These are only a few of the reasons why cultural self-understanding is regarded as an important element of cultural

competence. However, although people typically think that they know their own culture, the greatest difficulty in intercultural learning may exactly be becoming aware of one's own cultural conditioning (Adler 1997). This finding suggests that new methods are needed for intercultural training. In this paper, we outline some theoretical and experience-based starting points for a study that supports designing of an effective Internet-based learning environment for developing cultural self-understanding.

### **Themes and setting of the study**

In the proposed study, learning of cultural self-understanding is going to be examined from three perspectives:

1. Learners' view of their cultural background/context and of themselves as cultural persons
2. The role of social interaction in learning cultural self-awareness
3. Students' experiences of learning in a Web-based environment.

Empirical data will be collected from a few international courses to be organised through an Internet-based learning environment. The courses aim at developing participants' cultural competence. On each of the courses there will be two to four student groups enrolled from different countries. Before the beginning of the study two pilot courses have been organised between groups from Finland and Yugoslavia/Serbia. The experiences gained from these courses will be used as starting points for the forthcoming study, and some of them are documented in this manuscript.

### **Cultural self-understanding as a narrative**

Definition of any concept depends on the theoretical framework adopted. In this study, we regard self-understanding as a narrative form, because like Hannula (1997, 4), referring to McIntyre (1985), argues, people most fully understand themselves, their surroundings and their lives as narratives. We define cultural self-understanding as a story of one's own cultural identity. Cultural self-understanding contains meta-level awareness of one's cultural identity. A person with high self-understanding recognises that cultural identity is not determined by "laws of nature" but is socially and personally constructed and influenced by different social,

historical, political, personal, and other factors. Culturally self-aware person also realises that he has the right and power to re-describe himself in accordance to his ideas, values, interests and fears (Hannula 1997).

### **Cultural self-understanding as a learning process**

Development of cultural competence can be regarded as a lifelong transformative learning process (e.g. Taylor 1994; Varis 2000). According to Mezirow (1991), transformative learning is a process of questioning the assumptions and values that have been taken for granted in childhood socialisation and may have lead to distorted meaning perspectives. The assumptions that are considered as invalid, will be revised, and the changes in assumptions lead to changes in how one views the world. Mezirow argues that transformative learning is essentially a process of critical self-reflection. The process is often stimulated by some disorienting situation which may be for example encountering a strange culture. Another necessary element of learning, besides critical reflection, is rational discourse, examination of assumptions and arguments in social interaction.

Mezirow's view of transformative learning as a cognitive rational process has been de-emphasised by some researchers. It has been demonstrated that learners do not necessarily rely on rational discourse but experience transformation as a change in how they reorganise their life stories in relation to a particular cultural narrative (e.g. Edwards 1997). This is one of the findings to support Taylor's (1998, 34) conclusion that there are also other as important factors in perspective transformation as rationality, such as emotions, other ways of learning, and unconscious learning.

We tentatively describe learning of cultural self-understanding as a process of becoming aware and questioning self- and culture-related assumptions (e.g. values, stereotypes), identifying the factors that influence one's narrative, and giving new meaning to one's cultural identity. If learning leads to transformation, the learner tells a renewed story of his cultural identity, reflecting a "more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative" (Mezirow 1991, 167), multidimensional, and dynamic perspective. As a result, learner's relationship with his cultural identity has become more conscious.

### **Some observations from the pilot courses**

During the two pilot courses conducted in 2002, no systematic research and analysis was yet undertaken. Nevertheless, these courses have provided lots of useful experiences and data that can be used as basis in designing a study. Below we report a few initial observations related to our three main research themes.

#### **Relationship to the cultural context**

It can be observed from the student portfolios that the Serbian students have had three main approaches when describing their cultural background. First is purely individual, reflecting one's own opinion about his/her personal experiences and family life. Second is promoting their multicultural background which comes from the area they were born and live (Vojvodina) and the other is criticism toward their own culture. Very often, while describing the centuries long atmosphere of tolerance in the territory they are living, students use words like "mixing" or "mixtures" to refer to their multicultural background. Third, it can be also noticed that some students put themselves in the position to defend (by explaining the 12 years long political crisis in the Balkans, or by stressing the unique tolerant area they are living in).

The Serbian student groups consisted of both refugee students and home-settlers. In face-to-face discussions this lead to many interesting contrasts, facing different opinions and cultural backgrounds. It was also noticeable how students got into verbal conflict with their communication partners and how they tried to solve the conflict by searching for adequate words and expressions, and trying to find common ways of dealing with the issue. The Serbian students seemed to recognise the material of the course and topics discussed as essential for the benefit of the society they are living in.

#### **The role of interaction in learning**

A large number of researchers agree that social interaction plays an important role in both learning and development of self. Communication and interaction are generally viewed as core processes of constructivist learning. In many self-theories the self is seen as being born

in social experience, in relations to other individuals. Since the value of interaction seems evident for learning cultural self-understanding, we are interested in exploring what meaning do students give to interaction and how it should be organised in order to facilitate learning efficiently.

In the first pilot, both Serbian and Finnish students expressed a common wish of active sharing of information and experiences of the course with students from the other country. They were also willing to get feedback on thoughts, group conclusions and ideas for further development of the issues presented. Students wanted more active online discussions and they were also interested in improving communication on the Web-based learning environment by suggested more possibilities for exchange of course experiences.

Students demonstrated high awareness and respect for the importance of bringing different issues together, making interdisciplinary approach more visible and open for transformation. They became aware of the benefits of sharing also more private thoughts with other students. Some of them recognised the meaning of international communication:

*"It is great way for group working, collaboration and learning about myself and about my culture through your culture." (SS, in discussions 11.11.2002)*

*"You are right SS, I really learn about my own culture through your culture. When someone ask something about Finland, I'll learn by accident and when you tell something about your culture, I'll find the similarities or differences!! " (EL, 28.11.2002)*

### **Learning with and through technology**

Students' feedback indicates a general positive approach to web-based learning. Although both students and tutors faced several difficulties in using technology, most Serbian students accepted it as support and environment for learning through communication. They started from the very beginning to explore the environment and its possibilities so that they very soon got used to its different features. Furthermore, students were interested in sharing of opinions and "learn something new" from each other. Students responded to the course environment with good understanding of the possibilities that the Internet gives to the course concerning cultural issues.

One of the students' main complaints concerned time schedules and the fact that they could not meet online at the same time. Due to different organisational approaches in Finland and Serbia, students hardly met on the net simultaneously. Instead, they had the freedom to log in and leave messages and questions to each other whenever they like. Still Serbian students were clearly wishing for more real-time communication which is visible in their frequent suggestions for using chat and simultaneous instant messages.

### **Discussion**

The pilot course experiences raise several questions to be considered when planning the next course and a formal study. There are issues related to use of technology, organisation of communication and collaborative learning, organisation and methods of cross-cultural research, languages, etc. Special attention has to be paid to the sociocultural and historical contexts of the different student groups while interpreting their thoughts and discussions.

With regard to technology, students responded positively, but with serious remarks on improvements toward making communication closer. This brings us to one more reflection: if we already make people close by online collaboration and learning together, then we should use all technology to provide them this closeness with no restraints. We assume that by offering choice on the ways of communication we will get to even more frequent sharing and reflections in the course where this is one of the prerequisites of success.

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<sup>1</sup> We prefer to use the term self-understanding in order to connote a deeper critical stance toward the object of awareness. However, in this manuscript, cultural self-understanding and cultural self-awareness are used synonymously in order to associate our study with more widely known research on cultural self-awareness.