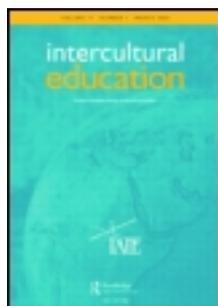


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### Intercultural education in everyday practice

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## Intercultural education in everyday practice

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While there is substantive work in intercultural education, especially that which proposes intellectual or conceptual road maps for pedagogic interculturalism and, more specifically for the classroom, there is a need to surface the complexity of everyday intercultural classroom practices. This article reflects on some Singapore students' responses to materials designed to help them engage critically with intercultural issues. These responses can be categorized into three types of trajectories: *reifying*, *critical* and *conflicted*. Reifying practices basically mean that students essentialize individuals, communities and countries despite (and perhaps because of) the intercultural approach to the teaching of communication. Critical trajectories, on the other hand, showcase students' ability to identify stereotypes and provide much more nuanced characterizations of individuals and countries. Conflicted trajectories, however, seem to be the most dominant classroom practice: these are attempts of students to be critical but, in practice, their criticality is enmeshed in reifying tendencies. In other words, 'criticality' as it is envisioned is always incomplete on the ground. Thus, we need micro-lenses in interculturalism and intercultural education to help us critically reflect on and surface essentialisms, tensions and struggles in everyday classroom practice.

**keywords:** intercultural education; interculturalism; classroom; classroom practice; critical; Singapore

### Introduction

'From global terrorism to local community conflicts', Brigg and Bleiker (2011) argue, 'cultural difference is widely invoked in conflicts that beset today's world' (1). One way to address this 'problem' of cultural difference is through interculturalism, a configuration of beliefs and practices which promote respect for and acceptance of diversity in today's societies. For example, some governments around the world have responded to problems concerning migration, ethnic nationalism, minority rights and environmental preservation through the promulgation of laws that recognize the existence of minority groups in society and their contributions to national development. Such steps often translate to the broadening of national education curricula to a wider range of voices and stories in the hope of greater social inclusion. In this sense, pedagogic interculturalism in the twenty-first century,

is best envisioned as applied social science promoting the dialogue between cultures and civilizations, as well as supporting the development of democratic multicultural societies. (Bleszynska 2008, 542)

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In a more specific sense, pedagogic interculturalism, or more commonly referred to as ‘intercultural education,’

strives to eliminate prejudice and racism by creating an awareness of the diversity and relative nature of viewpoints and thus a rejection of absolute ethnocentrism; assists people in acquiring the skills needed to interact more effectively with people different from themselves; and demonstrates that despite the differences that seem to separate people, many similarities do, in fact, exist across groups. (Cushner 2009, 2)

However, it largely remains to be seen how interculturalism is applied, apprehended or appropriated in business education contexts. Thus, the purpose of this article is to reflect on interculturalism as it comes alive in the classroom by providing examples of how various responses to a text offer ‘intercultural’ stances which otherwise would not have been made visible in more common conceptual studies in intercultural education. Through these reflections, I will raise compelling questions about how the practice of intercultural education is far more complex and nuanced than what is envisaged in the literature.

A substantial literature base exists in intercultural education, especially regarding intellectual and conceptual road maps for interculturalism (Batelaan 2000; Bharucha 1999; Bleszynska 2008; Coulby 2006; DeWitt 2003; Gundara 2000; Oikonomidou 2011; Wilson and Wilson 2001; Zembylas 2011), as related to its shape and politics as its principles are incorporated into national curricula (e.g. Chircu and Negreanu 2010; Horst and Pihl 2010; Hovhannisyan and Sahlberg 2010; Pratas 2010), as well as practical road maps for the classroom (Devran 2010; Ernalsteen 2002; Le Roux 2001; Mushi 2004; Sharan 2010), including for teacher education (Cushner 2009) and designing intercultural education and training programmes (Stephan and Stephan 2013). However, there is a need to investigate the complexity of classroom responses where intercultural agendas are introduced to gain a better understanding of interculturalism as it is taught and learned in day-to-day classroom work. Teachers too are designers of intercultural relations, for example through the materials that they design in their classes (Young and Chi 2013, 134), yet agenda-setting intercultural pedagogies and policies ‘are seldom juxtaposed to their actual implementation in the classroom setting’ (Valdiviezo 2010, 29). Work in this line of inquiry is sporadic but critically important (see also Harbon and Browett 2006; Hulualani 2011; Moloney 2009).

Moreover, the article also argues that while a range of intercultural stances occur, interculturalism may play out in ways that sometimes deliver results that differ from what is expected. In other words, even its critical dimensions are ‘not exempt from the pitfall of reification’ (Mendoza 2011, 100) and do not materialize in ways and shapes theoretically envisaged (Bleszynska 2008; Borrelli 1991; Dasli 2011; Gorski 2008; Lund 2003). There is, thus, a need to look at classroom practice as a locus of conflict, negotiation and transformation of even the most earnest and critical pedagogies (Nieto 1995; Sleeter 2003).

### **What is criticality in the intercultural classroom?**

Criticality is, to be sure, a slippery concept. However, in this article criticality is viewed as a range of perspectives that attempt to question the continuing stereotyping and reification of culture in intercultural classrooms and other social settings. In

its most basic form, a critical perspective assumes that culture is a dynamic, fluid and complex entity, as opposed to a static view wherein individuals stereotype specific groups of people (Nakayama and Halualani 2010). One consequence is that culture is essentially *cultures* – plural – with national culture as only one dimension. Gender, class, subnational ethnicities, intergenerational relations and many others all come into play in intercultural interactions. Even those who appear to privilege ‘national’ culture are mindful of this distinction. As Levine, Park, and Kim (2007) write, ‘nations and cultures are sometimes confused and very often confounded in theory and research’ (208). Even countries such as Japan, Korea and China which have been traditionally assumed to be relatively homogeneous are increasingly seen as intra-nationally diverse in many aspects of life, including their communication styles (Park et al. 2012; Yoshida, Yashiro, and Suzuki 2013). Such a critical perspective also interrogates the notion of ‘local’ and ‘foreign’ because in some highly multilingual contexts, Africa for example, the ‘foreign’ cuts across custom, indigeneity and language within national borders (Adejumobi 2008, 76). A postmodern critique goes even further: it locates the locus of intercultural interactions and engagements in the uniqueness of individuals’ cultural identity (Jameson 2007; Nair-Venugopal 2009).

### ***Politicizing ‘culture’***

Criticality also involves an avowedly explicit political position that recognizes culture as a nexus of unequal power relations between or among speakers who, because of the cultures they embody and which constitute them, struggle over power and dominance (Bryan 2010; Dasli 2011; Mendoza 2011; Rowe 2010; Wilson and Wilson 2001). Another example of an explicitly political position concerns the view that cultural interactions historically have in fact been ‘much more commonly characterized by conquest, slave trades, imperialism and genocide’ (Coulby 2006, 247), so the classroom must also account for such troubling interactions. Thus, there certainly is no singular view of criticality in intercultural classrooms. However, what they all have in common is the belief that intercultural communication which stereotypes and reifies culture, and which equates culture essentially with national culture, is problematic. A critical intercultural classroom, therefore, must *at least* work against stereotyping and reifying culture.

### ***The dominance of cultural essentialism***

Why is criticality an imperative in the intercultural classroom? The answer, plainly stated, is because essentialist deployments of culture continue to be dominant both in the theory and practice of intercultural communication. The work of Hofstede (1980, 1991) has been critiqued from different fronts, for example including the methodology (McSweeney 2002), stubborn focus on the nation as the essence of culture (Jameson 2007), and under-appreciation of culture as constituted by relations of power among speakers and interlocutors (Nakayama and Halualani 2010). However, while essentializing theories of culture (see also the works of Hall 1976; 1966; Tormpenaars 1993) are ‘profoundly problematic’ (McSweeney 2002, 113), they remain ‘fixtures’ (Cardon 2008, 399) in cross-cultural academic work. Examples include ‘the *direct* communication style in Western culture and the *indirect* style in

non-Western culture' (Ding 2006, 87, italics supplied), and 'Western' and 'Asian' ways of doing business (Freeman and Browne 2004, 169).

I concur with Jameson (2007) that 'both practitioners and researchers will benefit' from a far broader and more nuanced view of culture in communication and education (231). Not only will teachers be provided with a wider range of strategies and activities to deploy in the classroom such as moving from traditional classroom-based (Devoss, Jasken, and Hayden 2002; Mushi 2004) to more ethnographically informed techniques and approaches (Nesbitt 2004). They will also be sensitized to culturally critical stances in *any* kind of classroom activity. For example, Hulualani (2011) uses familiar strategies in intercultural classrooms such as simulations, journaling, case scenarios and case studies, but deploys them to probe into 'the ways in which power plays out in cultures and intercultural communication encounters and contexts' (50–51).

### **The context**

This article draws on my reflections of teaching and designing materials for the course *Business Communication*, a second-year level compulsory undergraduate course in the School of Business of the National University of Singapore. The students are Singaporean students, with one or two international students in a tutorial group of 18–20. It is a compulsory 48-h course which means that all undergraduate students of the school, regardless of major or specialization, are required to take it. As coordinator of the course, the materials I design are used in all tutorial groups (numbering between 15 and 22 groups per semester). The general aim is for students to learn how to deliver their messages in different business forms and channels effectively; that is clearly and appropriately. Because clarity and appropriateness are cultural concepts, the course expounds on the nuances of effective business communication.

The cultural dimensions of communication are introduced in the first few meetings of each semester and frame the rest of the work in the course, including report writing, letter writing and oral presentations, in order to help explain why speakers write and speak in the manner that they do. The teaching of business communication continues to be Anglocentric; that is it is viewed generally from the lens of 'Western' values and practices (Cardon 2008; Devoss, Jasken, and Hayden 2002). Thus, by grounding the course in intercultural communication, I hope that students become more accepting of different cultural norms in communication and less vulnerable to stereotyping and ethnocentrism.

### ***The framework of the course***

The 'intercultural' framework that underpins the teaching and design of curricular materials has undergone transformations through the instigations of recent academic and institutional changes. For example, the course has been recodified by the business school as a 'leadership' core module among business students, and the broad ideal that must be taught is 'responsible', 'ethical' and 'caring' leadership that is 'global' and 'Asian' at the same time. Similarly, this reconceptualization of the course is a response to the recent politico-academic climate where connections are made between economic theories and practices in the classroom and the role of business persons and economists in recent troubles in the global economy (Podolny 2009).

Moreover, the field of business communication has also engaged in deep self-reflections, resulting in the redesign of curricula that give more attention to pedagogies based on ethical and cultural considerations. In her speech to the Association of Business Communication, Jameson (2009) related the teaching of business communication to the larger political economy of globalization by arguing that the field of business communication is partly responsible for recent economic and business troubles in the world.

Pulled together, the institutional and academic re-visioning of the educational agenda informed the redesign of intercultural materials in the business communication course previously mentioned. It is for these reasons that I focused on learning more about the influence of materials as they are taught in the classroom and interpreted by the students. To these ends, several questions and issues arose concerning the daily operationalization of interculturalism in the classroom, including its critical dimensions, which require further examination.

### ***The ‘intercultural’ material***

The article critically reflects on two semesters of materials design (2009–2010) completed for the course based on student scripts, my own classroom notes, observations, reconstructions of short dialogues and interactions during classroom discussions and tutors’ meetings – all of which were collected as sources to guide my reflective teaching (see Tupas 2010). The current article describes and interrogates students’ engagement with one classroom teaching tool, an excerpt of a meeting among three executives of a company. What is in question is the prompt that describes each of the meeting participants and, thus, had an impact on how the excerpt was understood. The instruction was for the students to analyse the text from an intercultural perspective, looking at patterns in communication among the participants and to relate them, if possible or necessary, to the participants’ cultural orientations or predispositions.

### **Interculturalism at the chalkface: pedagogical reflections**

In this section I describe observed practices and transformations that surfaced in my classes. The varied reception at the chalkface affirms the complex nature of the classroom owing to the fact that individuals bring along with them differing ideologies and discourses which largely define how they respond to specific classroom texts and activities. In the section that follows, I categorize my observations of student responses to an ‘intercultural’ prompt (see Text A) into three kinds of trajectories: *reifying*, *critical* and *conflicted*.

Reifying practices refer to student tendencies to essentialize individuals, communities and countries despite (and perhaps because of) the intercultural approach to the teaching of communication. Critical trajectories, on the other hand, showcase some students’ critical approach to culture; they are able to identify stereotypes and provide much more nuanced characterizations of individuals and countries. Conflicted trajectories, however, seem to be the most dominant classroom practice: these are attempts of students to be critical but, in practice, their efforts were constrained by reifying tendencies. Generally, students in the classes did not exemplify traits of highly ‘critical’ communicators. Instead, their engagement with interculturalism was conflicted. Thus, ‘criticality’ as it is envisioned remained incomplete and in need of further development.

### Text A: The ‘intercultural’ prompt (original)

Revenue growth vs. corporate image management

In an excerpt of a meeting below, three top executives of *Finance Asia*<sup>TM</sup> discuss how best to proceed with revenue growth strategies. **Konrad Paracuelles**, who has studied and worked in the Philippines, is the Assistant Director for research. **Faiza**, trained as a marketing strategist from Malaysia, is the Head of the company’s corporate image management division. American **Laura Smith** is the Managing Director of the entire company and is the most senior of the three.

### Reifying trajectories

The prompt draws on a dominant understanding of interculturalism where speakers from different cultures, but largely national cultures, come together to create an intercultural situation. Some students would view Konrad and Faiza, because they are Filipino and Malaysian, as ‘less direct’ than Laura who is from the United States. In other words, the students could be guilty of cultural essentialism where nuances of culture are ignored, including the participants’ individuality.

It may be argued that the design of the prompt itself already positions the student to read the meeting excerpt in a particular essentializing way. The prompt’s characterization of participants ignores the complexity of the globalized corporate world because it ‘pushes us in the direction of a ‘dictatorship’ of the cultural by reducing the individual to his/her cultural membership’ (Abdallah-Preteille 2006, 476). However, one can actually also probe deeper into the prompt and find important contextual and cultural clues about the participants such as their variegated specialist work and Laura’s seniority which could have shaped the patterns of interaction between the actors as well. As a consequence, other important clues are ignored because the students engaged in the endemic ‘concretization of nations through daily reification’ (Ono 2010, 88) because their everyday framework pushes them to assume the existence of reified cultural traits, behaviours and values associated with particular national groups. Such a framework or cultural ‘knowledge’, in turn, may drive their understanding of the prompt.

Thus, some students think, speak and write within the *still* dominant functionalist or postpositivist paradigm of thinking about culture. In this paradigm,

... culture is often viewed as a variable, defined a priori by group membership, many times on a national level, and includes an emphasis on the stable and orderly characteristics of culture, and the relationship between culture and communication is usually conceptualized as causal and deterministic. (Martin and Nakayama 2010, 60)

Therefore, postpositive intercultural instruction and analysis essentially requires at least two analytical steps. First, students must accumulate cultural facts or knowledge about nations and their people. And second, they must use this knowledge to explain patterns of intercultural communication. It goes without saying that before communication takes place its shape is largely informed by who the participants are going to be. The analysis becomes a practice of ‘trying to understand people by

reproducing what we already know about them' (Ono 2010, 93). In a social cognitive sense, students internalize stereotypes in the form of cognitive schemas which simplify social reality (Augoustinos and Walker 1998), and which are then reproduced discursively as illustrated in the current article (van Dijk 1990).

### Critical trajectories

Some students are more skilled at addressing stereotyping and interculturalism and, thus, demonstrate more criticality than others. I have observed three distinct critical stances. Each is discussed separately.

#### *Interrogating stereotypes as emerging criticality*

One critical stance concerns questioning the design of curricular material itself because it may promote stereotyping. Students, for example, have highlighted the fact that while the lectures in the course emphasized the need to avoid stereotyping national cultures, the exercise (through the prompt) forced them toward stereotypes. Students have explained that the characterization of individuals in the prompt neatly corresponded with particular cultural ways of speaking, thus giving students very little space to interrogate the characters.

The groups were clearly aware of the need to avoid stereotyping, but felt pushed to do so because of the way the text was designed. What is, of course, particularly unique in this case is the possibility that students were developing self-reflexivity regarding their assumptions and values, stirred up, in part, by the lecture on stereotyping. The students illustrated their capability in exercising criticality by questioning problematic texts, surfacing nuances beyond reified or essentialist knowledge, and demonstrated 'an evolving capacity to engage self-reflexively' (Chan and Law 2013, 214) with the complex nature of communication, culture and knowledge production.

#### *Cultural similarities*

During the second semester, the prompt was revised based on observations and feedback provided during the previous semester.

#### **Text A: An 'intercultural' prompt (revised)**

Revenue growth vs. corporate image management

In an excerpt of a meeting below, three top executives of *Finance Asia*<sup>TM</sup> discuss how best to proceed with revenue growth strategies. Konrad Paracuelles, who has **studied and worked in the Philippines, Singapore and Germany**, is the Assistant Director for research. Faiza, trained as a **strategist in multinational companies based in Malaysia and the United States**, is the Head of the company's corporate image management division. Laura Smith is the Managing Director of the entire company and is the most senior of the three. She has **almost two decades of banking experience in several Asian countries**.

Based on a revision of the original text, the students seemed to build on the assumption that the three characters (Konrad, Faiza, and Laura) are more similar in

their patterns of talk than different. All three are described as relatively powerful; while Konrad and Faiza are sometimes silent, the students did not attribute their silence to culture. Rather, they felt that the characters probably needed time to think. Interruptions between them were attributed to friendly exchanges, and not because one is more culturally ‘direct’ than others. Some students, therefore, described how a ‘new’ culture of openness and collaboration emerged between them.

This is a departure from the earlier reifying stance that focused on how talk makes the three characters different from each other. The dominant stance that emerged focused on commonalities between the three participants in the company without grounding them in the essentialist notion of culture as ‘national’. This view of culture opens up to an identity-based lens (Jameson 2007) which begins to de-privilege or decentre the nation in the configuration of cultures. Thus, while reifying stances privilege and essentialize difference (Abdallah-Preteille 2006), some critical stances explore an alternative open-ended commonality that emerges *in the moment* of intercultural contact.

### ***Transforming culture at the moment of speaking***

Similarly, a nuanced appraisal of the prompt could also be gleaned through the students’ perspectives on silence. While the three participants exert relatively the same amount of power, Konrad and Faiza are sometimes silent, but also supposedly interrupt Laura in other parts. Again, the silence of the two participants was not haphazardly explained through their ‘national cultures’, but the interplay of different elements present in the interaction. The students did not claim that Konrad hesitated because he comes from an ‘indirect’ national culture; instead, the students argued that he and Faiza sometimes stop talking because they need to consider the ongoing dialogue. Thus, unlike the reifying stance which assumes a priori existence of cultural differences, this particular critical stance provides an explanation of the cultural dynamics between the participants as they emerge from real-time interaction. In this sense, culture is created and transformed at the moment of speaking, leading to the point that ‘what we ‘know’ is never fixed and stable’ (Martin and Nakayama 2010, 66).

### **Conflicted trajectories**

Admittedly, critical stances previously discussed are *not* typical responses even after the prompt was revised to account for more nuances in the meeting excerpt. What are more common are responses which combine criticality with other intercultural trajectories. What emerges is not criticality as envisioned as an ideal pedagogical approach or framework, but one that is deeply embedded in the everyday politics of interculturalism which shapes students’ (and tutors’) operationalization of criticality in the classroom.

For example, students would describe the meeting as ‘low-context’, that is talk is generally clear and frank and does not rely much on culturally embedded meaning-making. The culture in the meeting was described as plural; the participants drew on a wide range of work and life trajectories, thus their behaviours were generally unpredictable from the point of view of nation-based interculturalism. Laura was also described as American for being direct, even if she paused and listened to

others. Konrad and Faiza too were direct, thus defying their so-called Asian ways of communicating, even if moments of hesitation were present.

On the one hand, the students' appraisal of the text displayed a nuanced and critical understanding of interculturalism. For example, 'low-context' is deployed not in relation to national cultures, but in relation to the specific context of the meeting itself. It is clear to the students that the meeting is complex because it is 'plural'. Each participant is not reduced to one national culture (e.g. Filipino, Singaporean, American). Furthermore, it appears that the students continue to latch on to dominant functionalist or post-positivist paradigms of thinking about culture. For example, the meeting is 'plural' because there are times when Konrad and Faiza defy their so-called Asian communicative 'traditions' by being direct.

As mentioned earlier, this has been the much more typical nature of criticality in the classroom, where it does not occur in isolation but is deeply entangled with other seemingly less critical understandings of intercultural interaction, thus raising questions about how intercultural experiences in the classroom produce paradoxical outcomes. It surfaces the intricacies of interculturalism as it is practised in the classroom. To a large extent, this is unavoidable as the classroom is, to start with, a socially and ideologically complex setting where both teachers and students bring along with them their own essentialisms especially in relation to national and subnational ethnic stereotypes. The practice of essentializing has been found to have profound and powerful explanatory power in human reasoning and has been noted very early in human development (Gelman and Taylor 2000). This tendency merges with the ubiquitousness of nation-states or 'cultural containers' (Taylor 1994, 156) which make them 'natural' and easy targets for cultural boundary-making. Thus, the practice of intercultural education, even in its critical dimension, is indeed fraught with contradictions.

## Conclusion

This article has described a range of ideological stances in a classroom in Singapore from the perspective of interculturalism. From downright stereotyping as a deeply ingrained intercultural practice, we also see more critical dimensions of interculturalism where students demonstrate self-reflexibility towards their own cultural assumptions and demonstrate an understanding of the highly nuanced nature of culture. Surely, the role of materials design cannot be ignored: we see the potential influence of materials to 'frame' students' analysis of texts. As my reflections underscore, even in the context of an intercultural classroom that is envisaged to be critical in its take on cultures, what emerges are complex and conflicted stances due to 'conflicting pedagogies' (Valdiviezo 2010, 38) or 'potentially different worldviews' (Radstake and Leeman 2010, 430). An intercultural approach to education (no matter how this approach is defined in more specific ways) may not be intercultural in the way we think it to be. Practices of stereotyping and essentialism exist, and in cases where critical ideas are introduced, criticality is deeply enmeshed in ideological struggles.

'To prepare the learner for the outside complex world', according to Mushi (2004), 'teachers must consider cultural diversity (among other dimensions of diversity) in the process of guiding the creation, development, experiencing and interpretation of knowledge and skills' (180). What this article emphasizes, however, is that teaching and learning about cultural diversity (and even helping learners critically engage diversity and its deceptively attenuating discourses) do not necessarily lead

to the teaching and learning of cultural diversity the way it is envisioned. Consequently, we need micro-lenses in interculturalism and intercultural education to help us textualize essentialisms, tensions and struggles in everyday classroom practice. As we make these problems and contradictions more visible, we also sharpen the trajectories of pedagogic interculturalism. While it remains an ‘aspiration’ (Coulby 2006, 247); in practice it is a relentless struggle.

### Notes on contributor

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