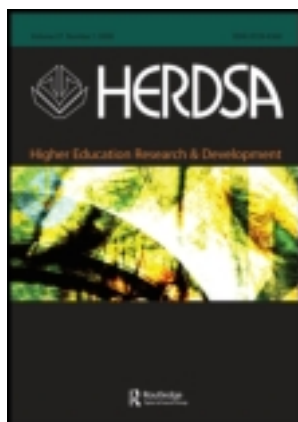


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Guided interaction as intercultural learning: designing internationalisation into a mixed delivery teacher education programme

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Guided interaction as intercultural learning: designing internationalisation into a mixed delivery teacher education programme

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In this paper the process of building an international student community is explored. Strategies discussed include guided interaction within a virtual environment between home students studying in their own culture and international students studying at a distance. The context includes both the state and private sector in South East Asia, Latin America, Europe and the Middle East. The subject is a Master of Arts in Education for practising in-service teachers of English. Through exchanging teacher narratives, students identify shared concerns and values about their profession and recognise connections with their peers in apparently widely different cultural settings. Student and tutor evaluations suggest that participants developed the competence of recognising connections between their own meanings and behaviours and those of others. They also deconstructed their assumptions and unexamined beliefs through engagement with others. The paper concludes by analysing how these competences impacted on the self-knowledge and practice of the participants, and suggests the generative principles which made this learning effective.

Keywords: home student experience; intercultural competences; international competences; *savoir être*; task design for internationalization; teacher development; teacher reflection

Introduction

During a recent interview with students at one of Britain's new universities, a home-based English-speaking student said: 'it's a missed opportunity when someone on the other side of the class is from a country you've never been to and you never get a chance to talk to them the whole time – you just have to get through the syllabus' (Spiro, 2008). This suggests one of the core challenges in educating learners to be citizens of the world rather than just 'knowers' of their subject discipline: in focusing on the syllabus and narrowly defined assessment objectives, major opportunities are missed for students to learn from one another in a context of mutual cultural exchange. If this is the message, then opportunities to embed 'international learning' into syllabus realisation are urgently needed. In bringing to the forefront the notion of an international curriculum, universities have opened the debate about what competencies such a curriculum might generate (for example Francis, 1993; Haarlov, 1997; Rizvi & Gough, 2003). Byram (1997) generated a framework of intercultural competences, which included a number of 'savoirs' or competence areas. Amongst these, I am

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selecting one, *savoir être*, as the focus of this paper. Byram defines this as ‘a willingness to suspend belief in one’s own meanings and behaviours, and to analyse them from the viewpoint of the others with whom one is engaging’ (p. 34). This specific sense of learning with and through others is a core outcome embedded in the learning cycle described in this study.

This paper illustrates how guided interaction through an e-environment between home-based and worldwide-based teachers leads them to a common understanding of shared values, as well as a revisiting of their own cultures and assumptions.

Internationalising the home student: the context

Wächter (2000) defines internationalization at home as ‘any internationally related activity with the exception of outbound student and staff mobility’ (p. 6). The steering paper generated from the Internationalisation at Home Special Interest Group (Crowther et al., 2000) identified as a problem the fact that less than 10% of students in European Universities were availing themselves of opportunities (through exchange schemes such as Erasmus) to study in foreign universities. Thus, to make the notion of an international education meaningful, other strategies apart from actual foreign travel would need to be considered for the 90% that stayed at home. Wächter describes the imperative of doing so along several parameters: the first of these is that ‘in a global economy it makes less sense than ever before to orient the qualifications passed on to students towards the needs of national labour markets. Universities must prepare for international requirements’ (p.10). For a university to ‘prepare’ students for an international environment entails sensitivity to those mismatches that occur when lecturers and students come from different cultures. Otten (2000) defines the challenge of the lecturer and student staying at home as ‘sensitivity to cultural diversity at home requires reflection upon the implicit cultural patterns of the entire context of educational and social interaction’ (p. 18).

For these expanded notions of graduate competence and university obligations, new pedagogies need to evolve. Teekens (2000) describes characteristics of the ideal international classroom. Amongst these are included: making ‘use of multimedia in an integrated way – to enhance the international component’ (p. 32).

There is an understanding in the literature that the online environment has created both incentive and imperative for new modes of communication: global, interactive and entailing the use of a shared language/interlanguage. In addition, digital literacy is something that the student generation has grown up with, as part of their natural repertoire of communicative skills, although not necessarily in ways that might support higher level study. Higher education pedagogies have expanded to take account of this double imperative, both to accommodate the young learners’ likely familiarity with the medium, yet their unfamiliarity with the skills and purposes of technology for advanced study (Williams & Rowlands, 2007). Duncan and Barnett’s (2009) study focuses on online learning as a teacher skill to be developed and arrives at the view that online learning needs to be more embedded into teacher education programmes. In a study of pre-service teachers, O’Connor (2009) describes the role of video observations as part of an online course. The study showed that the pre-service teachers arrived at their own insights into good practice, which were as sound and varied as those which might have been reached through trainer intervention. Haigh (2007) showed that science students at the University of Wisconsin who studied online generated more learning and study skills than those who were committed only

to face-to-face means of communication. They were 'more comfortable than face-to-face students communicating electronically, had better access to the Internet, and reported better typing skills' (p. 93). Thus, the online environment, used responsibly, has the potential to serve the cause of giving the home student experience negotiating understanding with students from other cultures and languages.

Research has shown that the combining of stories can offer a powerful collective voice within the profession, for example expressing frustration with protocol, audits and prescribed criteria (Bell, 1995; Day, Sammons, Kington & Quing, 2007; Munro, 1998; Thomas, 1995). However, in facilitating dialogue in English language education, different educational values surface, strategies such as rote learning, reading aloud, dictation, translation and silence being judged negatively in Western paradigms (Cortazzi, 2000, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2002). Gender issues also need to be considered, differential access being the norm in some countries, for example in Indian or Arab cultures, and the price for transgression can be high. Nafisi (2003) gives an example of how differently the genders might experience access to intellectual opportunity and the social/political responsibilities this places on the teacher. In her account of teaching English literature to a group of Iranian women, Nafisi describes the opposition they met from family and the physical and personal risks they took in order to attend her classes. Teacher narratives such as those by Appel (1995) in Germany, Aoki, Sunami, Li and Kinoshita (2004) in Japan and Doecke, Horner and Nixon (2003) in Australia show teachers generating their own theories of good practice, often in contradiction to those imposed externally. Thus, whilst the online environment can offer opportunity to recognise common narratives, it is also important to build into this mediation process full acknowledgement of the culturally specific and to allow full voice for diversity.

The study described here explores how an online medium can serve this dual cause of exploring cultural specificity and identifying commonality. It will draw on task design, which I am calling the *pyramid* and the *cascade*. Both of these start with the student's individual perspective and involve an 'opening out' to achieve consensus, understanding or impact with an ever widening group.

The task design: building a pyramid of teacher beliefs

This study partially maps the framework for online group dynamics suggested by Salmon (2002). Salmon's first stage involves the basic requirements of technological access and the building of motivation to engage with the online environment (p. 13), the second stage involves cohesion and team-building processes, the third stage involves exchange of information, leading to 'constructing knowledge together, moving beyond simply exchanging information' (Dooley, Masats, Muller-Hartmann, & de Rodas, 2008, p. 52). Salmon (2002) points out that these stages need not be linear, but are likely to be cyclical or spiral in formation. In other words, socialization may need to be revisited at several points in the learning process and technology may cause disruption at any point to learner motivation and access. Salmon's fourth stage involves knowledge construction and the fifth development with 'participants (looking) for more benefits from the system to help them achieve personal goals and reflect on the learning process' (p. 10). In the task design described in this paper, this final stage is conceived as a formulation of precise action informed by the new shared knowledge and which I have called *cascading*.

The participants in this study are 38 in-service student-teachers based both in the UK and worldwide, communicating with one another through a ‘virtual’ online environment during a 12-week introductory module within a 2-year masters programme in teacher development (2005–2008). The explicit goal of the programme is to develop the capacity for ongoing reflection and continuous professional learning, whilst the implicit goal is to give student-teachers the experience of revisiting their cultural assumptions about their own teaching context and deconstructing their stereotypes about others.

The study traces the process by which student-teachers first establish their own identities and priorities as teachers within the online medium, through guided discussion. They are then regrouped into clusters of four to five, small groups being seen as an important starting point in studies such as that of Salmon (2002). Within this regrouping they are asked to identify common patterns in their priorities as teachers, as well as differences. Participants are asked to share what they think might be the source of these differences: institutional constraints, learning background, cultural context or other. As an outcome of this stage of their interaction, they are invited to draw up a series of statements about their practice as teachers, to which they can all relate. Over the several years in which this process has been developed, these statements have been shared between groups, creating ‘long lists’ of shared beliefs and priorities cutting across year groups. It is this process I describe as a ‘pyramid’ because the source of information grows from the single identity of a teacher to an ever-broadening community of practitioners.

Having reached these outcomes as a result of the 12-week study cycle, student-teachers were then invited to keep a record over the subsequent two years of study, showing the impact of this study cycle on their actual practice – whether it had led to actual, virtual, physical or metaphysical change to their practice. I describe as a ‘cascade’ the process whereby the benefits of the programme ripple out to the classrooms over which these student-teachers have responsibility.

Contextualising the student-teachers

The student-teachers themselves are all teachers of English with a minimum of two years experience before embarking on this programme. They are based either in their own home contexts or worldwide as student-teachers experiencing a new and foreign culture. The former group (Group A) are teaching in their home cultures to students with whom they share a mother tongue. Members of this first group, with two exceptions, teach in the state sector, experiencing the constraints of national syllabi, large classes, local league tables and institutional audits. The second group (Group B) are student-teachers working in a foreign culture, sharing neither a mother tongue nor culture with their students. Whilst some share the conditions described for Group A, others work in the private sector, such as in-company language support, after-school private classes, the British Council or language school settings (see Table 1).

A further dimension contrasts students studying part-time at a distance and those studying on-campus and full-time. The distance/online group teach full-time and study concurrently on a part-time basis. For them the online medium is the prime form of communication they have with the peer group. The study programme for them is taken part-time over two years. For the on-campus group, student-teachers have opted to take a year out from their employment to study full-time and some of these are sponsored by schools and colleges or with government scholarships. Others

Table 1. Demography of student-teachers in the project.

	Total in group	Country context	School context	Study medium	Student-teacher relationship to teaching context
Group A: Based in their home culture	13	Brazil, Mexico, Germany, China, Belgium, Ghana, Taiwan, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, UK	State sector 11 Company 1 Language school 1	On-campus 9 Online 4	Based in home culture 13
Group B: Based in a foreign culture	25	Korea, Vietnam, Turkey, Egypt, Iraq, China, India, Thailand, Sudan, Japan, Taiwan, France, Mexico, Austria	State sector 7 Company 1 Language school 15 After-school club 1 Personal tutoring 1	On-campus 5 Online 20	Based in foreign culture 25

have made large personal and financial sacrifices to leave home to immerse fully in study for one year. For them, the study programme is completed in 12 calendar months.

The distinction being researched for the purposes of this study was that between the home-based and the internationally-based student-teachers. Thus, in assigning quotations I will refer to the following designations: based in home culture Group A students 1–13 and based in a foreign culture Group B students 1–25. The students gave their consent at the start of the course for their discussions to be archived for the purposes of research and, once the programme was completed, for this archive to be analysed and quoted for the purposes of the research. The full study and assessment cycle was completed before this research study was initiated so as not to impact in any way on the independence of the research from the teaching process or vice versa.

Methods

The research is interpretative in approach and draws on qualitative data within the small-scale framework of a case study. The research process involved three phases. The first phase involved student-teacher engagement in online guided dialogue, with researcher-teacher as facilitator/observer in the process, providing the initial structure/stimulus. Apart from this latter role of the researcher-teacher, the dialogue, and data emerging from it, was archived without intervention or moderation.

The second phase involved a process of guided evaluation once the dialogue had been completed. Student-teachers were invited individually to respond to a series of open-ended questions that encouraged them to revisit the archived data, both immediately after its completion and one semester (or six months) later, and to evaluate its connection with their practice.

The third phase involved the researcher-teacher comparing the two sets of data in order to identify patterns, connections and development between student responses at

each of the stages. The broad question in evaluating this data was: how far did this online learning process impact on the self-knowledge and practice of the participants, both according to their own perceptions and through an analysis of data by the researcher. In the latter case, the researcher identified explicit linguistic cues such as verb form: 'I used to think/I always thought', vocabulary choices such as 'I realise/I didn't realise', explicit and implied value judgements and contrasts between past and present perceptions and practice.

Exploring teachers' narratives

At the first stage, student-teachers were grouped into clusters of five or six and invited to share stories of significant moments in their practice. Their opening discussion trigger was: *Share a moment in your teaching experience which was important or significant to you for any reason. Explain to your peers why you have chosen this moment, and what you think it reveals about you/your teaching context.*

Whilst this was an open invitation, most of the teachers described negative moments that had also led to moments of realisation: desperate first lessons conducted before and without the help of training or mentoring (A3,B1,3), perfectly planned lessons disrupted by monsoon rains hammering on the roof (B7), an observer leaping in and 'giving advice' (A8), carefully sorted handouts flying round the room in the gust of a fan (B7), battles with unteachable course books or artificial and meaningless tests (A4, 7; B2,6), 'students from hell' who were disruptive, sceptical, bullying or dominating (A3, B7), battles with school authorities for recognition and put-downs from family, bosses, colleagues or students about professional status (B3,6; A5).

After this first storytelling stage (which was given a one-week time frame), student-teachers moved to the stage, described by Salmon (2002) as 'information exchange'. Their instructions were: *Read the stories of others in your group. As a group, identify what you feel to be common themes that you all share/are concerned about. Then identify where you feel there to be differences in focus, concern or experience. Can you explain why?*

Here the dialogue moved between exploration of the cultural specificity of each teacher's experience and the group-forming tendency to identify connections and parallels. For example: a student-teacher had travelled to China to teach and, though a passionately committed teacher with qualifications, found 'I was treated just like a back-packer who had come to the language school off the street. I was treated just the same, as if I had no skills at all' (B6). A student-teacher in her own context in Ghana recognised this lack of status: 'We have no status in Ghana. I am a teacher of 10 years and I don't believe anyone thinks what I have is a profession like a doctor or lawyer' (A6). From this exchange, the group were able to recognise that for each of them, status and recognition were problematic. A UK home student said, 'I always thought teachers were really respected in other countries and it was just here we have problems. People always knock teachers: all the problems in schools are always our fault. That's interesting that we all have to put up with this' (A10). This view was echoed across the state sector and private sector student-teachers: both believed the situation might be better for the 'other' sector and were surprised to find this was not the case.

Focusing specifically on methods and classroom practice, a UK student-teacher working in Turkey said, 'I always thought I was a learner-centred teacher, but I was just shocked when I saw a video of myself and realised I answer all my own questions, I never give the students time to talk, I do all the talking myself' (B3). A student-teacher in

Mexico responded: 'I realised the same. An observer came to my class said all the ones at the back were asleep. I am like an actor. I like to talk but I don't even know I do it' (A2).

Another student-teacher from China, working in her home environment, said: 'I was taught like this and it was so boring. I want to be another kind of teacher' (A4). This was a helpful directive for a student-teacher working in China as a foreign culture: 'that is so helpful to know you found it boring. I didn't know whether this is what Chinese children want or what they have to do, but now I think you've helped me see it's just what they have to do' (B6). All the student-teachers with this concern worked with large classes in the state sector. The difference was noted by a student-teacher in a language school in Japan: 'I think you have the problem because your classes are so much bigger. I have 12 in the class and they are all about the same age as me. They are OK and talk a lot' (B10).

The debate about relevance of curriculum, resources and tests was also one that united the student-teachers. Again, the state sector believed the private sector teachers to have an easier time. A UK home teacher said: 'we are so driven by tests and league tables there is no room to be creative. I would love to work in a school that ran its own curriculum' (A10). A language school student-teacher in Mexico said, 'it's not as free as you think. All our courses are based on exams set by Cambridge and we have no control over what comes up at all. It's hard to make it relevant and interesting to students in the south of Mexico' (B15). A Brazilian student-teacher working in a state primary school responded: 'for me, too, the curriculum we have to follow has nothing to do with these children. They are so poor sometimes I bring food for them to school' (A1). Across several groups this mismatch was recognised. 'I have to teach literature books to the students (in a state college in China) which are very difficult. One is Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. I wouldn't choose this. It is very very hard to make interesting to the students' (A4). Student-teachers recognised this mismatch within their own culture, but these insights also supported the student-teacher in foreign cultures who were unsure how culturally sensitive their criticisms were. 'I see that change would need to come from a very deep place. The course book we use here is all just reading and writing, but I see I can't just go in and change it. Maybe I need to be a bit gentler about change' (B2).

A further shared focus was that of discipline. All agreed that 'discipline' might have more significance with younger learners and larger classes, but teachers in the private sector recognised its importance too. For them, 'discipline' meant maintaining a positive rapport in the class and dealing with students who were negative or hostile. The student-teachers also noticed culture-specificity in their definition of the term 'discipline'. One student group commented: 'We all talk about discipline but we mean different things. In Iraq E talks about maintaining authority as a teacher. In Egypt S talks about discipline when students are learning' (Cohort, 2007).

Emerging from these dialogues was the negotiation of understanding: firstly that constraints were shared and were not unique to one setting and, secondly, that 'insider' insights might help the 'outsider' and vice versa – the outsider might be positioned to make 'gentle' change, while the insider might find validation for their concerns.

Formulating shared values

The third stage invited student-teachers to: *As a group, formulate three to five statements about beliefs and values as teachers, which you all share. This will become your group's manifesto about what you all find important as teachers.*

This problem-solving process required the exercise of empathy and open-mindedness, and the capacity to hear and voice the concerns of peers. Collective summaries were arrived at through participation by all voices in the group: whilst one of the group took the initiative and offered the first summary, each student entered the conversation in order to add, edit or rethink elements. Some of the shared statements are listed below:

- We all search for legitimacy and respect: from students, within the institution, and in the wider community.
- We all search for professional excellence, through syllabus design, quality lessons and appropriate relationships with our students.
- We all strive to meet student needs, using whatever resources, teaching paradigms or ideologies work best. Student needs come before any current orthodoxy
- We all wish to be responsible for the teaching experience, in order to be professionally fulfilled: we want to be creative and autonomous to do the best for our students.

Two further statements reiterated over three years of this study include the following:

- We all regard teaching as a calling rather than a profession.

The *delight* of teaching emerged as a driving force in the teachers' choice of career and often in spite of challenging conditions such as short contracts, low status, under-resourced classrooms or highly regulated curriculum. One described teaching as being 'a great bear hug' (A10), others described a passion for teaching derived from childhood memories of being read stories (A2) or role models of inspirational teachers (A4, 5; B6, 7, 10), some described entering teaching for instrumental reasons and then 'falling in love with it' (B7, 10, 11; A10, 13), recognising how much more creative this was than earlier careers in business and management (A12, 13; B12). For many, this collective recognition offered affirmation of their career choice and a spur to further development within the profession.

- We all have a clear notion of what we regard as success in our practice as teachers, and these at times conflict with institutional criteria.

What also emerged were teacher-led standards of judgment as criteria for success, in contrast to institutional and exam board criteria. This generated discussion about the ways in which, as 'grass roots' members of the language teaching profession, these student-teachers might connect together to provide feedback to exam boards and help to shape criteria in their own institutions more congruent with core teacher values. Amongst those values are included:

- freshness and immediacy of the content areas (excitement/enthusiasm/freshness),
- handling planned actions flexibly in order to be responsive to emerging situations,
- creativity/autonomy/ownership of the content and methods and
- teacher's knowledge of information extrinsic to the classroom, e.g. the role of the second language politically and socially, the children's attitudes and concerns outside the classroom.

Cascading values to the classroom

I referred earlier to the notion of ‘cascading’, in which core values become drivers for actual change in the classroom, so that learners too benefit from their student-teachers growth in self-awareness. The student-teachers in these year groups between 2005 and 2008 were invited to keep a record of it and how the identification of these values had had any impact on their practice after one year. In closing statements at the end of the programme, all 38 students across the three years of study reported the impact of this study on their practice, experience or self-esteem. Six noted that they had continued correspondence with one or more of their peers in the discussion group. Examples of cascading included one student teacher (B10) noting that, because of her dialogue with student-teachers from China who admitted that they had found their education in teacher-centred classrooms ‘boring’, she had had the courage to suggest a change in her language school in Japan. She persuaded her line manager to allow her to use reading lessons to discuss the topic and explore meanings and connections, rather than to ‘read aloud’ as prescribed. Another student-teacher working in an after-school club in Vietnam (B2) was not clear whether what she was noticing in a child constituted dyslexia or a natural process of second language learning. Through her discussion with other student-teachers (A4, A7), she came to understand the specific difficulties of children with a pitch mother tongue learning an Indo-European language. This led her to take responsibility for finding out about dyslexia and how it might manifest itself in a second language. She came to the conclusion the child had been treated like a low achiever and had come to internalise this knowledge and that this, combined with the challenges of the language difference, explained the fossilisation of the child’s errors.

However, amongst the most important benefits of this collective learning process were the long-term benefits of establishing a ‘habit’ of shared learning that eight student-teachers report as having energised all aspects of their practice. One student commented: ‘This piece of action research has had far-reaching effects. Not only has it pulled me out of a heavy feeling of stagnation, it has inspired a culture of change throughout my language institute. We are having regular meetings to exchange ideas’ (B2 in Vietnam).

Designing internationalisation into learning: students’ experiences and task design

The students in group B, studying in international contexts, reported that the discussion forum had been crucial to their sense of engagement with the study community. The most active student-teachers were working away from their home culture with easy access to the e-environment in their schools and homes. For them, this interactive project had been ‘a gift’, ‘it promotes and supports what we do in class’, ‘although I’m studying in Egypt I feel close, well kept and supported according to my needs’ (B4). In response to the question: *Has this module influenced your own practice?* one student wrote: ‘it has not only developed my confidence which most of the students from overseas lacked but also introduce to different ways of looking at teaching pedagogy’ (A4). We have also seen (above) examples of student-teachers feeling supported to make changes and improvements in their practice and to build long-term professional links with colleagues worldwide.

The home-based students (UK student-teachers) expressed their enjoyment of learning through dialogue and exchange, but also recorded their initial resistance. Several

reported that talking to colleagues in their own staffrooms was a far easier and more 'comfortable' option than going online and 'talking to someone the other side of the world' (A10). Initially their international peers experienced frustration and disappointment with this sub-group. One writes 'working in isolation for such long periods is very uninspiring and frustrating' (A6). The campus-based students came to recognise the collective responsibility of participating online: at first their view was that in so doing, they were helping others: 'When I work with others I feel needed, I really feel I have something to contribute, I like it' (A13). However, through the cycle of activity they came to appreciate that this was crucial for their own learning too: 'I found I learn more by talking to other students' (A12). Specifically, they felt they had learnt the importance of an international perspective. A UK student-teacher became critical of optional foreign languages in the UK National Curriculum 'what's happening now will really set us apart from other countries so we just won't be international minded – instead of taking languages out they should be put back in at primary level' (A12). They became aware of the UK system as only one amongst many: 'There is no English without other countries. Britain is nothing without other places' (A10). They also reported the process of transformation the dialogue entailed: 'I learnt to respect what others are doing and to realise all teachers want to make a difference and want to feel empowered and creative' (A10). They came to appreciate, too, their own initial reluctance to communicating outside their comfort zone and the extent to which they had then learnt from their international colleagues once they committed to participation.

A 'critical mass' of students proved to be an essential factor in the success of the experience. The student group number at times dropped below six, which created frustration and isolation for those remaining. Unavoidable technical breakdowns were caused by the earthquake in Tai Wan and floods in India to name but two. In contrast, home students found discussion of tasks with colleagues around a table more congenial than online communication. Whilst a project of this kind needs to make considerable concessions to the first kind of student, it also needs to offer considerable incentives to make online communication attractive for the second kind.

Incentives for participation, as a result, were built in to the second run of the project. The task became a requirement and the outcomes were fed into the summative assignment. On-campus students were also asked to post short summaries of face-to-face dialogues their online peers were not able to share. A larger cohort also meant students had opportunity to identify more closely with their online sub-group and there was less dependency on active individuals to keep dialogue alive. The feedback from both internationally-based and home students suggested they understood how the project fitted into the curriculum and, specifically, what they were learning through it. Thus features of the task design match Teekens' (2000) 'ideal international classroom' in making 'use of multimedia in an integrated way – to enhance the international component' (p. 32).

Conclusion

The online dialogue described here offers an interesting insight into the dual and interwoven processes of exploring personal narratives and in so doing recognising resonance with others. The student-teachers in this study came to recognise shared constraints and injustices in their practice. They came to realise that they were using terms such as 'discipline' differently, depending on their culture and context, whilst recognising this as a shared concern embedded into their training. They also arrived

at their own criteria for judging professional effectiveness and focused on deeper extrinsic knowledge of their students and the conditions of their learning.

The project shows how much can be learned from identifying significant experiences and recognising the core values that underlie them. Student-teachers moved from being narrators of their personal stories to analysts and interpreters of a collective narrative. This process involved the capacity to see beyond surface differences and to relate deeply to common values and concerns. Examples of change recognised by students included a previous failure to appreciate the specificity and differences of other teaching contexts and a revisiting of assumptions and beliefs about their own culture. Some also recognised the blocks that had made them resistant to this understanding formerly – for example, assumptions about multilingual/national group-forming and their own role and responsibilities within this. In making these changes they indeed developed the skill of *savoir être* described at the opening of this paper, ‘a willingness to suspend belief in one’s own meanings and behaviours, and to analyse them from the viewpoint of the others with whom one is engaging’ (Byram, 1997, p. 34).

Importantly, the journey towards both individual and shared values also drove change and improvement in their own practice. Students reported the validation they had experienced through the process of sharing and this had given them confidence to discuss concerns with colleagues and suggest ways of better meeting learner needs.

Interestingly, it is possible to make the challenge of heterogeneity a rich learning resource through this ‘pyramid’ strategy. As part of the ‘syllabus’ goal of reflective professional awareness, a chain has been generated that connects ‘learning about self’ with ‘learning about other’ in a cycle of interdependent learning. In these ways, a response is offered to the student quoted at the start of this paper who challenges the university to combine the demands of the syllabus with the ‘chance to talk’ to students from other and unfamiliar parts of the world.

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