Module 2, Session 2: Culture, history, experience and home language in the curriculum

We don't meet cultures but rather people who represent some aspect (accurate or imagined) of 'their' culture, which we recognise in its difference from 'ours'. Wikan (2002: 83) expressed her surprise at "people's proclivity to talk as if culture were endowed with mind, feeling, and intention. (…) as if culture had taken on a life of its own." Philipps (2007: 45) also reminds us that culture is unbounded and heterogeneous; it is "produced by people" and so cannot "explain why they behave the way they do." So any cultural habit, any form of cultural heritage, is the result of encounters and mixing with representatives of other cultures. Trying to define a culture or its borders often leads to limiting and segregating it from its formative interactions and influences. Who decides what it is? Think of your 'own' culture: Do you see it the same way as people from a different social background? generation? gender? religious group?

Cultural mixing revealed in everyday words

Oranges are thought to have originated in southeast Asia and been introduced to Europe by Portuguese traders. The modern Greek word of portokali reflects this. The maritime Venetians called the 'new' fruit naranza, drawing on the Sanskrit naranga, which in turn came from an ancient Dravidian word, which passed into English via the filters of Spanish, where it was naranja, and French as orange. English speakers never knew the initial 'n', as it was dropped as a result of being merged with the French 'une'. Around 1400, orange came into the English language, having made the 5,000 mile journey from southern Asia to our shores along with the fruit itself so the word we use today tells a story of cultural mixing going back hundreds of years.

There were actually two sorts of oranges imported to Europe (from China), one more bitter than the other, so two names were in circulation until the bitter variant fell out of favour with consumers. The word each language settled on therefore reflected that country's relationship with the fruit and its journey to its markets. The modern Dutch word sinaasappel gives a nod to its origins (an apparently unrelated word) in China, whereas the Greek word notes its journey via Portugal (Sanders, 1995), and in English we stuck with 'orange', which took on more layers of significance with the reign of William of Orange, whose cultural significance continues today with the Orangemen of Northern Ireland. These everyday words are a reminder of the diverse influences on what we think of as British culture.

When you think of 'your' culture, you can also probably deconstruct certain aspects of it, appreciate how they are the result of mixing with 'other' cultures and how the newcomers we work with also have a culture that has been influenced (and is being influenced) by others. Some scholars have criticised the use of the concept of culture as it tends to give the impression that culture is endorsed coherently by those who are supposed to be represented by it (Bayart, 2005: 74). In such cases people remain imprisoned in the 'straitjackets' of culture or as Prashad puts it (2001: ix) culture "wraps [them] up in its suffocating embrace." Adib-Moghaddam (2011: 19) reminds us that coherent cultures do not exist and that, thus, talking about a clash of cultures (or civilisations) is very much questionable (see also Bayart, 2005: 103). People can clash not cultures so zooming in on the individual is key to understanding newcomers. 'Their' culture does not define them and a reductive view of newcomers as products of their culture would restrict our understandings and ability to work with them, even if we were able to obtain an 'objective' view of that culture. When we work with newcomers, we work with people, not cultures.

In intercultural encounters the 'power' of culture has also been used to explain why people do not understand or misunderstand each other. The assumption is: People have different cultures so when they meet they encounter problems. Yet Sarangi (1994: 418) wonders why this is always branded as 'intercultural misunderstanding' while "when it involves participants

from the same 'culture', [it] become[s] labelled as a challenge." In many instances of misunderstanding between people from different countries, interculturality has nothing to do with culture.

Illustration adapted from Dervin & Layne (2013)

This example shows how culture is often used systematically to explain what 'we' do and what the 'other' does. The example is drawn from a booklet that was largely distributed to international students at a Finnish university some years ago. The booklet aimed at teaching these students how to 'behave' in the institution. In the following excerpt the authors explain to the students what is expected of them in terms of autonomy: "Whereas in many cultures people are supposed to follow instructions of teachers and supervisors, Finns are encouraged to solve problems independently and take initiative when needed. Thus while young people in many cultures live a very protected and supervised life, students in Finland are very independent and take responsibility for their studies. This is another area where foreign students also get easily confused." It is interesting to note how the use of the concept of culture allows the authors to 1. Position Finns and Finnish culture as being excellent and 2. Relegate other cultures to inferior positions. It is also noteworthy that the people who are included in the discourses of culture shift from "in many cultures people", "young people in many cultures" to "foreign students", thus generalising about the latter's capacities – or incapacities in this case. Needless to say that such discourse on 'our' culture and 'their' culture are ideologically biased and the creative potential of interculturality will be missed out on.

Home language

Pupils' multilingualism is not always seen positively. According to Auger (2009), teachers can find it hard to separate academic and linguistic skills, which leads them to exclude second languages from the classroom. However, it can be rewarding for both the teacher and the pupil to make use of what the pupil is already capable of: this way, pupils feel valued and can transfer elements that they are already familiar with in their home languages to the school language, which allows for further development.

For example, older pupils who have developed academic and cognitive skills in their first language(s), can develop academic and cognitive skills in their second language(s) more easily than younger pupils (Cummins, 1981). In addition, Cummins (1981) showed that pupils who move to a different country when they are six or older need at least 5 years to get to the same language level as native speaker pupils. This means that for at least five years, the observation and assessment of the pupil should focus on their development: these pupils have to develop more quickly than monolingual pupils and they need to be given the opportunity to do so.

Proactive and strategic use of learners' home languages should therefore be made. This allows the pupils to have access to higher conceptual and cognitive tasks. Kenner and Ruby (2012) conducted a study in which they showed the advantages of bringing the cultural and linguistic knowledge of the pupils and their communities into the classroom, creating new spaces for multilingual learning. The creation of a new syncretic curriculum enabled:

- More collaborative learning;
- Greater involvement of parents and communities in schools;
- The construction of confident learner identities for the pupils;
- More openness to intercultural communication in the teachers.

One of the ways to improve multilingualism in class is translanguaging. This strategy involves the use of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without strictly ensuring that the child only speaks the target language. Translanguaging focuses on what the child is capable of and integrates the pupil's first language with a new target language with both oral communication and written texts.

Furthermore, the use of dual language books can boost literacy skills in bilingual children. In a study by Sneddon (2008), teachers were asked to actively support this approach by providing bilingual books to pupils while the parents provided expertise to stimulate the transfer of reading skills from the school language to the family language. The result was that pupils achieved a higher level of literacy than their peers in the school language while developing fluent reading in their home language. Based on various theories and examples of multilingualism, Cook (2001) describes the need for teachers to move away from the idea that the second language learner needs to achieve the same goals as the monolingual speaker.

Reflection on identities

Presentation of Self

Think about your own identity. Are there elements of it that you believe are always the same and will always be? Are you aware that sometimes you might adapt how you present yourself depending on who you are talking to or to specific contexts? In what ways do you think your students and colleagues do this?

Groups and Individuals

Is it possible for you to determine clearly how many groups you belong to? Can you define the boundaries between these groups? What influence do they have on your opinions, behaviours and attitudes? Is the direction of influence – from group belonging to/from your 'individual' behaviour always the same? How often do you use your group belonging to explain what you do, what you say and how you behave?

Activity

Participants watch video on microaggressions:
 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVsU7Mufs8Q&t=50s
Participants share their positive and negative experiences of being (mis/)recognised as a member of a group, personally and from their experience of diverse classrooms.

About yourself
1. Think about your experiences of being away from 'home'. What was your status? Immigrant? Tourist? How did it feel to be an 'other', i.e. a member of a minority? What were the benefits, what did you miss out on, what felt uncomfortable?
2. When you were abroad, did you experience some form of discrimination? In what contexts? Education? How did you react? Did anyone help you?
4. Do you think that your social, ethnic and linguistic background has an influence on how you are treated when you go abroad? Do you feel privileged or 'unlucky' in a sense?
5. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you could not interact with people abroad because you did not speak the language? How did it feel? Did you find ways of dealing with this kind of situation?

About school and newcomers
6. How much experience have you had of newcomers?
7. What do you think are their first impressions of your school?

8. What difference does it make to your experience of teaching whether or not there are NAMS in your class?
9. What difference does it make to the class as a whole?
10. Do you think that you are well prepared to work with newcomers? How Much has your initial teacher education and training as well as continuous professional development helped you in your (future) work with newcomers?
11. Do you often consult other teachers and school leaders about newcomers? Do you find it useful?
12. What systems have been established in your school to support best practice in teaching NAMS?

Ten points to remember

n°1: Recognise, but don't dwell on, cultural difference

"Upon meeting others and during interactions with them, first ask: what is it that I have in common with these other people?" (Moghaddam, 2012). Let us put an end to differentialist biases, a common vision in education with newcomers which focuses exclusively on differences, especially in relation to the 'tired' and generalizing concept of culture (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1986). One such bias is the typical dichotomization between individualistic and collectivist 'cultures', which is often used to explain encounters between people from the 'West' and 'East' or the 'North' and 'South'. Holliday (2010) has analysed the ethnocentrism and moralistic judgments of such differentialism. The risk in continuing using these elements in such a loose and a-contextualised way is that they can lead "easily and sometimes innocently to the reduction of the foreign Other as culturally deficient" (Holliday, 2010: ix). *We are all different and similar at the same time!*

n°2: We share the responsibility of what is happening between 'us' and 'them'

Discourses on the self and the other – identity constructions – are always co-constructed between people. An identity is created and exists because there is another identity that can be compared or opposed to it (Bauman, 2004). Who you are in the classroom depends on who is in this classroom. The same goes for students in relation to you. Therefore, when we experience interculturality, our stereotypes, representations and ideologies inform and influence encounters and thus identities (Holliday, 2010: 2; Dervin, 2012). My identity is based on the presence of others, and vice versa. We thus need to include all those involved in intercultural encounters to explain and understand them instead of just one of them. The way interculturality takes place in the classroom depends on interaction between people rather than the presence of single individuals.

n°3: Accept 'failure' and learn from it!

Not everything can be explained as far as the 'intercultural' is concerned. Intercultural dialogue is not a product but a continuing process that is never finished. This idea has not gained much ground in education yet. However, many phenomena that we examine or teach about derive from the playful and the imaginary and cannot always be rationalised (Maffesoli, 1985). *We need to accept that not everything is understandable and that we should sometimes just let go and get back to it when and if needed!*

n°4: Live with 'ups' and 'downs'!

A lot of work has concentrated on structures and on describing how a certain group of people (usually determined by 'nationality' or 'ethnicity') communicates with another (Piller, 2011) – leading to the equation 'the more you know about their habits, thoughts, etc. the more able you are to "control" them and thus interact in a proper and unproblematic way'. Many scholars argue that this does not reflect the complexity of human beings (Pietrse, 2004; Wikan, 2002) and urge researchers and practitioners to look instead at exceptions, instabilities and processes, which are 'natural' parts of sociality (cf. Baumann, 1988; Bensa, 2010). *It is important as teachers to steer away from placing NAMs into 'nice' cultural and linguistic boxes and to look into their individuality which cannot but be unstable and processual. Accepting that working with NAMs leads to 'ups' and 'downs' is essential!*

n°5: newcomers are complex too

The idea of intersectionality, how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics intersect with one another and overlap (Crenshaw, 1989); or "the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination" (Davis, 2008: 67), is thought-provoking for education. It is recognised in the field of intercultural education, influenced by critical multicultural education (Banks and McGee Banks, 2009; Sleeter, 1996). Many scholars argue that it is not just 'culture' that guides interactions but the co-construction of various identities such as gender, age, profession, social class, etc. All these intersect in intercultural interaction and thus need to be taken into account (Sleeter, ibid.). *Interculturality is not a synonym for different cultures but for interaction between complex people and newcomers also experience complexity.*

n°6: Promote social justice

Recognising that 'race' is a construction used to subjugate groups of people in society helps us to remember the power structures that underlie interactions between different people In his critical cosmopolitan paradigm, Holliday (2010: 48) suggests increasing the awareness of institutional and cultural racism and power structures. Smith and Lander (2022) draw attention to the ways in which the education system has been de-racialised and propose that a 'pocket of possibility' exists for creating an anti-racism framework for initial teacher education and training to support action against this structural blindness that undermines our ability to promote social justice. *As a teacher working with potentially vulnerable children (NAMs) I have a responsibility to support their well-being, inclusion and equal treatment.*

n°7: Be systematically and critically reflexive

When dealing with interculturality in education, let our own feelings, experiences, and history, enter and support our work. Reflexivity can enhance understanding and interpreting by recognising the personal as a source of knowledge.

n°8: Address power imbalances

The concept of power should be central to engagement with NAMs education. Every intercultural encounter depends on power relations related to language use, ethnicity, nationality, gender, social status, etc. Intercultural encounters are often based around the idea of hospitality, which Jacques Derrida (2000) argued can easily turn into hostility, as there is an inherent power imbalance between a host and a guest – the latter being hostage to the former. *As teachers we need to be aware of the power differentials between us and newcomer students and try to reduce them as much as we can.*

n°9: Use language effectively

Working on and/or with interculturality requires the use of a language or different languages, as well as non-verbal forms of communication (mimics, silence, gesture, etc.). The use of certain terms involves 'not arbitrary choices but, rather, political choices with political consequences' (Westheimer and Kahne 2004:237). Language use is political and it communicates power differentials and symbolic violence. Teachers are professional speakers and should use their language tools inclusively.

n°10: Go under the surface of appearances

This is probably the most important message of the tool. We are all influenced by specific visions of interculturality, what it entails, how it should occur, for what reasons, etc. What we see as intercultural, or are presented with as being intercultural often hides elements that we need to deconstruct, criticise and, if possible, reconstruct to create meaningful interaction. In hearing the words *culture, community, value, the name of a country*, we should reflect on their use and on what these words do to those involved in the dialogue, going under the surface of appearances. *As a teacher, I must be some kind of detective who examines what people say, how and why in order to ensure well-being, justice and fairness.*

Questions for leadership

How is SLT going to support staff to develop cultural competency in relation to the communities within the school? Does the lesson/course content reflect the knowledge and experiences of EA learners and broadly support an intercultural dimension?

Questions for whole school

Have you evaluated your curriculum to ensure it reflects a multi-cultural Britain? Does your subject area include positive contributions made by people of colour? How could your department use the concept of global citizenship education to empower young people? How could you use pupils home language and background positively in your lessons? Conduct a curriculum audit to discover what your curriculum is promoting to pupils from diverse backgrounds and fill gaps where needed.

Reading list

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