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10. INTERNATIONALIZATION – A TOOL TO ENHANCE INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is based on more than ten years' work with students from Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences (HiOA) going to countries in the Southern Hemisphere for at least three months during their undergraduate programme. On average the number of students who choose to stay abroad for such a period is around 200. Less than 10% of these are men. We found the gender issue interesting and will comment on this in relation to the different categories of the students' reactions.

These students were drawn from different programmes, but had in common that they would graduate with a practically orientated education as nurses, teachers, social or health care workers. They were sent to countries like India, Cuba, Brazil, Tanzania, Uganda, Namibia, China, the Philippines, and the Dominican Republic and stayed there for at least three months, either working or doing projects, some of which were their undergraduate projects.

One of the major goals of the Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences (HiOA) is that its students should become familiar with internationalization, whether abroad or in Norway. It is considered important and necessary that intercultural competence is included in the educated student's portfolio. This goal led to a project where we were asked to follow students from the vocational teacher education programme when, for the first time, their programme included a period to be spent abroad in a country in the South. These students are different from the average undergraduate student in that they are older than most students; they have studied previously and are practicing as professionals in their various occupations. They are part-time students and work part-time in their own professional field. They have more social commitments (children, elderly parents, loans, and so on) than the average student. The occupations they represent include electricians, plumbers, carpenters, hairdressers, childcare workers, cooks, etc. Until our pilot project started, it had been impossible to find mature students willing to go abroad. However, when the project was presented to the students, ten were sufficiently interested to consider whether it would be possible for them to be away from home for three months. Eventually, only three of these students (one male and two females) completed the

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period abroad. We did a follow-up two years later with one mature female student who found it possible to spend three months abroad. It was these students that we wished to compare with the so-called average student group by looking for similarities and differences in how they coped with the new context.

DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/APPROACH

As indicated earlier, this research is based on more than ten years of observation of students going abroad to the Southern hemisphere. One consequence of such a long study period is that the data was collected using different methods and approaches.

Two main data collecting methods were utilized during this period:

Qualitative Content Analysis

We read and analysed more than 50 theses from different undergraduate programmes.To gain insights into how the students discussed and described aspects of intercultural communication, and thereby intercultural competence, in terms of personal and social phenomena in their theses, a qualitative content analysis was conducted. Content analysis allows the researcher to read and analyse large numbers of texts and to identify trends and patterns at an individual, institutional, or social level (Hesse-Biber & Nagy Leavy, 2011; Krippendorff, 2012; Weber, 1990). In addition, content analysis provides descriptions, analyses and potential solutions to problems related to the case in hand, making it possible to discuss events from a relativistic cultural prospective (Horntvedt & Fougner, 2015). The nature of the trends and patterns searched for and identified depend on the topic of that particular research. In this chapter, we were looking at results that related to the obtaining and enhancing of intercultural competence.

Case Study Approach

We also used the case study approach, and systematically interviewed students before they left Norway, while in the field, and after they returned to Norway. We also interviewed teachers and international coordinators who had been involved with the students both in Norway and in the countries visited. A case study is based upon a constructivist paradigm and built on the premise of a social construction of reality (Berger & Luckman, 2000; Vygotsky, 1996). The case study approach is an empirical inquiry that investigates phenomena within their real-life context (Yin, 2009; Creswell, 2009). As such, it is often used to discover underlying principles (Yin, 2009). A qualitative case study facilitates the exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources. Thus, in this research, the main sources of data were qualitative interviews, field visits and observations, and some documentary reviews.

One of the advantages of this approach is the close collaboration between the researchers and participants, which enables the participants to recount their experiences. The participants described their perception of the exchange programme, their role in it, their involvement, and the learning outcomes from this exchange period. The results from these studies, as they relate to intercultural competence, will be presented in the Findings section.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Three main sources described in the literature are used for obtaining intercultural competence. One is to draw on theory about human behaviour in different parts of the world; another is the experience one obtains by living in a foreign context, and the third source is the critical analytic approach where the students obtain competence by deconstructing their experiences through knowledge.

We found that de Wit's (2013) theory on the role played by internationalization in achieving intercultural competence in higher education was a helpful approach. One of his basic tenets is that internationalization per se will not necessarily enhance intercultural competence in students. The most important thing is for students to go into a foreign context and meet people from backgrounds different from their own. If they stay more or less isolated in a context similar to that at home, the learning outcome may be zero. This is enhanced if they also spend most of their time abroad in groups with other students either from their own institution or from the same country. Being able and willing to interact with the unknown is, according to de Wit (2013), necessary for obtaining intercultural competence in higher education.

We have chosen Fantini and Termizi's (2006, p. 12) definition of intercultural competence as our key theory in approaching this concept. They define this phenomenon as "a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself". Lustig and Koestler (2012) further limit this to occurring in contexts other than one's own. Studies have demonstrated that the most efficient way to enhance intercultural competence and awareness among students is through international practical placements (Barker, Kinsella, & Bossers, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2000; Koskinen & Tossaveinen, 2004).

FINDINGS

This section will be divided into two parts: the first part examines some trends and tendencies that all undergraduate students experience. The second part will deal with the vocational teaching students and what we have found to be particular to them.

Preparing students to become part of an international and intercultural world has become an increasingly essential part of the undergraduate programmes at Oslo and Akershus University College. This is despite the fact that there has been little research into the learning outcomes and problem-solving skills reported by students who

have spent part of their education abroad in Southern countries (Barker et al., 2010; Pechak & Black, 2013). According to Garaj, Orkai, Feith and Radwohl (2012) and McAllister, Whiteford, Hill, Thomas and Fitzgerald (2006), we need greater insight into the nature of knowledge construction and the process that leads to students making relevant choices. In our research investigating how students act and react in unfamiliar contexts, we have seen certain patterns that reappear independently of the student group or the programme attended. These patterns have been primarily based on data collected from the undergraduate students. We have seen four different reactions from the students when the context is new and unfamiliar. These patterns are, of course, not closed, and some students have been observed to move between the different responses.

One group of students, fortunately a small group, all of them male, became more racist than before leaving Norway. These expressed racist opinions either in their interviews, conversations with co-students or in project reports. We used the following definition of a racist from the Oxford Dictionary in this chapter because it is simple and to the point. It describes a racist as follows, "a person who shows or feels discrimination against people of other races or believes that a particular race is superior to another". These students said that they found the others to be dirty, unreliable, and less intelligent than themselves. This was seldom expressed directly to people they met, but rather in how they talked about others in discussions with their co-students, told us in interviews or wrote in their reports. As one student said when we asked him why he used shorts and singlet at work while the locals were dressed in black suit, white shirt and tie:" I don't want to be identified with these dressed up monkeys".

A small number of these students felt ashamed of themselves for having these thoughts and feelings, but as they said, this was the way they felt. We think that those students found their own attitude towards others difficult because of their social background. Being born and raised in Norway puts you through a socialization process that tells you that racism is unacceptable, and it is unacceptable to have such attitudes.

All these students took the view that their basic attitudes and feelings towards others from this part of the world were confirmed and sometimes reinforced by their stay abroad and by meeting with the locals in those areas. It seemed that it was more acceptable for the male students to express such negative thoughts out loud than for the female students. This may also have to do with gender socialization in a Norwegian context where, though all children are encouraged to present their opinions, males often turn out more direct and open in the communication than females. Females seemed to use other techniques to react to foreign contexts, and they often ended up in the second group.

The second group became xenophobic because everything was different from the way it was at home. They constituted around one third of the total number of the students and they were all female. Male students may have felt this way, but they never talked openly about it. We used the Oxford Dictionary as the source

for our definition of xenophobia; "dislike or prejudice against people from other countries". These students had difficulty interacting with the locals, not because they were racist but because the context seemed frightening, and they did not have the skills with which to handle their new context. They became paralysed and isolated themselves from what was happening around them. Engebrigsten (1988), in her research on families living in countries in the South while the husbands were working as representatives of Norwegian NGOs, describes how the wives became obsessed with washing. They washed everything including objects and clothes already washed by the house cleaners. They felt that everything around them was dirty. This happened even with those women who considered themselves liberal and open-minded. Gullestad (2002) describes this phenomenon, saying that although Norwegian society is characterized by openness to experiences from outside their society, the reality is that people become uneasy when foreign elements enter their society. Our findings revealed that the same thing seems to happen when certain Norwegians go abroad to live in foreign contexts.

Bakic-Miric (2008) describes a phenomenon called "cultural noise", saying that a culture's symbolic meanings and symbolic values can easily just be heard as cultural noise when an individual is not prepared to respond to them. Perceiving cultural noise has the potential to break down communication completely One student, who became so anguished that she more or less isolated herself inside her room, was asked by her co-students to go home to Norway. She didn't want to do that because it felt like a failure, she said. She went to a tourist place nearby and stayed there for a period with her husband and then returned to her co-students. For her, this worked, as she said: "I got slowly used to all the strange things in an environment that looked more like other tourist places I have visited before". Even though we try to prepare our students for what they are going to meet, we know that it is impossible to prepare anyone for what real life feels like.

A third group, as anthropologists describe it, "went bush". These were not many, but one or two each year ended up in this category. They were both males and females. They lost their ability to see both their native culture and the foreign culture; they jumped straight into the new society wanting to be assimilated as soon as possible. They forgot why they were in this society, that they had assignments to complete, and responsibilities in their native country. Their co-students often tried to "wake them up from this dream", but seldom succeeded. They found the new context to be so much more open, inclusive and warm than their native culture, which they now described as being superficial and too concerned with material goods. "Norway is such a cold country where nobody greets you on the street, nobody seems to care about strangers, only their own families and closest friends. But here, everybody greets you, is curious about you, wants to talk to you and take care of you even though you are a stranger" one of the students told us when she left her co-students and went to live with her new boyfriend's family. Some of these students remained in or returned later to this new society. Some even married and had children there. This phenomenon is described by Hofmann in her book "The White Massai".

The fourth group managed to balance their own culture with the possibilities available in the new context. They compared their impressions and made the best out of every situation. They were creative and flexible and searched for challenges and possibilities. We found both male and female students in this category. If they landed up in situations that were difficult or felt impossible to handle, they rolled up their sleeves and tried to find ways to cope. They were network builders and open-minded. They had what Jones (2013) describes as the necessary qualities for developing intercultural competence. An example is one group who arrived in an institution where they were supposed to spend the next three months, but nobody knew they were coming. This group rearranged themselves mentally, asked to talk with the boss in the institution and explained their situation. The boss listened to them and together with him they managed to find a new place to stay. Another example is a female student who came to a university on strike. She went downtown in the city and talked to people and found herself a place to work while waiting for the university to re-open again. As she said; "I cannot just wait until something happens, then I might wait forever, I have to solve this myself so that I learn something from this period." She learned a lot by building a social network around her while searching for a place to work.

When we started the most recent project with students from the vocational teacher education programme, we wanted to explore whether these students would react, cope and handle their period in the South differently from the regular students. These students were older and accustomed to handling adult challenges and responsibilities. They also had long experience from working in their original occupations. Their backgrounds were, in these ways, very different from those of the younger students.

Even though the number of students we were able to follow was very low (because of difficulties in finding students who wanted to go abroad), we found that they fell into some of the categories described above. It seemed as though age and earlier experience did not make a difference; it was the personality and personal qualities of the students that made the difference. None of the vocational teacher students we followed had racist tendencies, but we did find xenophobia, passivity, fear, insecurity, unwillingness, and indifference. However, we also found activity, creativity, flexibility, and the courage to find solutions to difficult situations and experiences.

One particular event made it easy for us to study how the students coped with unexpected events. When they arrived at the university in the South, there was a protracted strike going on, so nobody could meet them and instruct them as to what to do. From this, we could see how each of the students experienced, coped with, and reflected on the fact that they were left on their own. We were also able to see how their emotions and thoughts about this were expressed and we got some insights into how this influenced their opinions about their new context. For two of the students, this strike opened the possibility of getting to know the society outside the university and to build social networks independent of their status as students. For the third student, this led to passivity and reinforcement of her/his feeling of strangeness and

difference. This student expressed a feeling of being lost in an unknown world. All the vocational teacher students commented on the fact that they had been left alone when they arrived in the new context, but the active ones coped with this feeling completely differently from the more passive one.

One aspect of Norwegian society and culture that may not be familiar to everyone is the huge impact of the "ideology of sameness". This was defined in the Norwegian governmental White Paper no 49 (1996–1997): "the ideology of sameness must still to the greatest extent be an objective to secure citizens the same opportunities, and the same civil and political rights and duties, independent of background". This idea is central to the social democracy of Norway (Eriksen & Sajjad, 2011; Gullestad, 2002). Sameness in this context has its base in the Latin meaning of identity as idem, ergo "the same". One is primarily identified through the group one belongs to and is treated as one of the group and not as an individual. Everyone has the same possibilities, rights and duties as everyone else. This leads to a particular meaning for 'sameness', which does not refer to equality, but to a kind of similarity. One is expected to treat everybody in the same way, independent of status, background, culture, religion, ethnicity and so on.

This ideology is so incorporated into the Norwegian students' thinking that it affects their stay abroad. When they feel lost in an unknown world, where people are different, treat them differently, and relate in a more hierarchical way than they are accustomed to, they lack the tools to cope and to re-establish their security and stability in the new context. As we saw from the material studied, while some students managed to cope in these situations, many did not. Possibly these experiences of insecurity might, in some cases, lead to xenophobia and racism as a kind of defence. These reactions may become tools for survival, although they are tools that negated the possibility of obtaining and enhancing intercultural competence.

One could say that students in such situations go through a process of "othering" the local people that they meet. By "othering" we mean "the process of perceiving or portraying someone or something as fundamentally different or alien" (Wiktionary, 2016). "Othering" leads to "otherness": "the quality of being not alike; being distinct or different from that otherwise experienced or known" (Wiktionary, 2016). This may lead to the other being seen in contrast to one's self. This way of considering the other is expressed in the dichotomy of "us and them". Our understanding of the other, othering and otherness is based on ideas of social construction: we construct the other as a contrast to ourselves (Said, 1979). This process seems to give us an identity and through that a feeling of security. One knows to which group one belongs and which people are different from oneself. This is a phenomenon described as "the ethnocentric syndrome" (Axelrod & Hammond, 2003; Brown, 1988). Our congenital need is to construct in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel, 1970) to create some security and order in a chaotic world.

We also saw what might be a natural connection between the students' insecurity and the way in which the local infrastructure and the relationship between the cooperating institutions functioned. The more ineffective and uncertain these

functions seemed to the students, the more their inborn capacity to cope with the unknown was expressed. Nearly all the students expressed that at times they felt abandoned by both their home institution and the local institution. But there were significant differences in how they coped with this feeling of isolation. The most active and independent students saw this as a way of developing their own learning experiences: they went out, talked to people, explained what they wanted, and found places where they could stay and learn new things; while the more passive students became very frustrated and scared. They had no energy or will to redefine their situation; instead they stayed in their lodgings and waited for something to happen.

The more grounded vocational teacher students reacted in the same way when, due to the strike, they were left to themselves. One of the students coped with the situation by finding herself a place where she could learn some things she wanted to learn; another used this period to participate in the local culture, while the third one felt very uncomfortable and became passive and dissatisfied with the whole going abroad programme .There was one aspect in which the vocational teacher education students were different from the undergraduate students, namely which part of their competence portfolio they used when abroad. The undergraduates all worked in fields where they could use their knowledge and earlier experience from their bachelor education, whether they were nursing students, social work students, teacher students, etc. However, the vocational teacher students presented themselves first in terms of their original education and occupations. They wanted to work in the capacity of hairdresser, electrician, child and youth worker, and so on. Only one of them found, for a short period, status as a vocational teacher student. The fact that the students selected and preferred their earlier profession instead of taking the opportunity to act as teacher students surprised some of the local teachers and supervisors. Several of them commented that they had expected the students to want to teach in the vocational education institutions, but when they found that this was not what the students wanted, they let them do as the students themselves wished. One might wonder why the students chose to remain in their former professions rather than taking the opportunity to experience their role as teacher in a new setting. It might have to do with the fact that they were adults, with many years of working experience, and they wanted to appear competent rather than insecure and new in their role as teachers. This might also have to do with the status and power balance. We never asked them about this, but this might make an interesting theme for a future research project.

We have met hundreds of students in connection with our work with students going abroad. The meetings have been of different quality, with some just happening in passing, while others have been formalised as debriefing situations, and others have been interviews or conversations. However, even though some of the students have had painful and life changing experiences; some have found the experience very boring; some have been afraid; while others have fallen in love; we have never met one student who regretted going abroad. Even those students who had racist tendencies did not regret it. They had experienced a validation of their earlier opinions and as a couple of them said; “seen huge fantastic animals and beautiful nature”.

In the students' feedback and reports, all have expressed the view that they learned a great deal about themselves. Nearly all of them spoke about personal growth, but almost none spoke about learning outcomes in relation to their future roles as professionals or about enhanced intercultural competence. When asked to reflect on the connection between personal growth and professional practice, they said that they thought they had changed as individuals in ways that would make them better professionals. However, so far, none of students has spontaneously expressed the idea that they had obtained enhanced intercultural professional competence abroad.

We find this rather surprising and a little alarming. Why is this? Are the qualities required in the individual professional fields underdeveloped abroad compared to those of Norway? We do not think so. Are the students so caught up in their own way of thinking about their future profession that they really do not perceive what is happening in the places they visit? Are their expectations about their own learning potential set so low that they do not recognise that they are learning something new? There are many questions and challenges here that need to be discussed with other people committed to this kind of internationalization.

In conclusion, we found that while most of the students experienced personal growth through being abroad, many of them were unable to transfer this personal growth into professional intercultural competence. They were not aware of this. It seems that they constructed a barrier between themselves as individuals and themselves as future professionals. Tearing down this barrier might be a necessary part of a debriefing process when the students return to their home institution.

CONCLUSION

From our point of view, the impact of these findings will mainly affect the relationships between the professionals and those who use their services. In recent times, most societies have become increasingly intercultural, ecumenical, and inter-ethnic, and professionals need the skills to cope with the challenges arising in such societies. The more aware and well informed we can make the students for their stay abroad, the more skills the students will be able to bring to their interactions with people from all over the world. This may lead to fewer negative experiences and to improved communications between professionals and the people they serve than we see at present (Horntvedt, 2016; Daae-Qvale, 2016; Sørheim, 2000).

As far as we have been able to discover from the literature, our project is original. Firstly, it describes four reaction patterns among students going abroad to countries in the South, the racist-, the xenophobic-, the "gone bush"- and the interculturally competent group. Secondly, it makes a distinction between ordinary undergraduate students and vocational teacher students and compares their ability to cope in new contexts. One goal of our study was to discover whether these adult students would obtain intercultural competence more easily than the younger students. The results of this research show that the two groups were similar in most ways, with most of the differences being based on personality rather than on age or former experience.

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