CrossMark

ORIGINAL PAPER

"I find it odd that people have to highlight other people's differences – even when there are none": Experiential learning and interculturality in teacher education

Fred Dervin[1]

Abstract This article examines the role of experiential learning in developing intercultural competences in the context of teacher education in Finland. Local and foreign students studying to become teachers were asked to write five short narratives each about meaningful intercultural encounters they experienced prior to enrolling in an intercultural course. Based on these narratives, the author analyses the potential overlap between the way the students reflect on and interpret these encounters and an understanding of interculturality which concentrates on the construction of *self–other* and social justice. The discourse analysis of the students' narratives shows that in most cases, important intercultural learning seems to have already taken place before these students embarked on the course. The article ends with a discussion of the importance of starting from this observation in teacher education and of providing the student teachers with theoretical tools and methods which can support them in expanding their understanding of interculturality in their job as teachers.

Keywords informal education · student teachers · interculturality · immigration · encounters

Résumé « Je trouve bizarre de relever des différences chez les autres même s'il n'y en a pas » : apprentissage expérientiel et interculturalité dans la formation des enseignants – L'auteur de cet article examine le rôle de l'apprentissage expérientiel pour l'acquisition de compétences interculturelles dans le contexte de la formation des enseignants en Finlande. Des élèves maîtres finlandais et étrangers ont été priés de rédiger cinq récits brefs, relatant chacun une rencontre interculturelle marquante qu'ils avaient vécue avant de s'inscrire à un cours interculturel. Sur la base de ces

✉ Fred Dervin
   fred.dervin@helsinki.fi

[1]   Department of Teacher Education, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

⌖ Springer

récits, l'auteur analyse le chevauchement potentiel entre la façon dont les étudiants considèrent et interprètent ces rencontres, et une conception de l'interculturalité axée sur la construction du *soi-autre* et de la justice sociale. L'analyse du discours des récits des étudiants révèle que dans la majorité des cas, un apprentissage culturel significatif semble avoir été accompli dès avant la fréquentation du cours. L'auteur conclut par une argumentation sur l'importance de partir ce cette observation dans la formation des enseignants, et de fournir à ces étudiants des outils et méthodes théoriques qui peuvent les aider à élargir leur conception de l'interculturalité dans leur vie d'enseignant.

> The work of an intellectual is […] to bring assumptions and things taken for granted again into question, to shake habits, ways of acting and thinking, to dispel the familiarity of the accepted, to take the measure of rules and institutions.
> (Foucault 1994, cited in Gordon 2000, p. xxxiv).

Introduction

The role of the intellectual, as suggested by Michel Foucault, could not be better suited to the discussions on intercultural and experiential learning. Interculturality has been central to research on education over the past few decades. Often "disguised" behind other words such as *multicultural, transcultural, cross-cultural* and even *global*, the notion of interculturality has often been explored in formal educational contexts, with, sometimes, very little contact with the "real" world. To deal with the topic, many teachers use materials such as videos, textbooks, novels and only occasionally invite an "other" to their class. Interculturality, as will be explained in more detail in the body of this article, is more than just learning *about* other cultures. It refers to *interaction between* representatives of different cultures; in other words, communication and mutual understanding of each other's cultures is key to intercultural learning.

In the specific context of educational mobility (student teachers choosing to enhance their training by spending part of their training abroad), experiential learning has been at the centre of attention through preparation for intercultural encounters before, during and after the sojourn (Jackson 2014). The results of such intercultural pedagogy for stays abroad have been contradictory, depending on the paradigm and approach used (Machart 2016).

The focus of this paper is on intercultural learning through the experiential element in informal educational settings. The context is that of international teacher education in Finland. Based on intercultural narratives written by a group of international and Finnish students starting out on a teacher training programme in English, this paper examines the intercultural learning they have already experienced *prior* to enrolling in a course on intercultural pedagogy as part of their one-year training at a department of teacher education.

I begin by delimiting the way the intercultural is conceptualised in this article, especially in relation to experiential learning. The notion of the intercultural is polysemic and deserves to be sufficiently defined to make it useable in both research

and practice. After having positioned my work within a specific paradigm using critical discourse analysis (e.g. Angermuller 2014), I then examine the contributions of experiential learning, understood here as "a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skills, and value from direct experiences" (Jacobs 1999, p. 51), to interculturality as presented by the participating students in their narratives. I am especially interested in identifying examples which seem to contribute to the paradigm adopted in this paper. The article ends with a plea for including more experiential learning within and outside of classrooms in order to boost true interculturality.

Experiential learning and interculturality

What goals should intercultural learning aim for?

> Bring something incomprehensible into the world!
> (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 378)

The notion of interculturality has been used in research for over 50 years. First introduced in the field of communication, it then spread to education, business, linguistics and healthcare, to name but a few (Dervin and Tournebise 2013). The intercultural has become a wide range of ideological "fictions", some of which are potentially counterproductive and lead to further social injustice and inequality. This is the case with purely essentialistic approaches which continue to analyse interculturality with categories which seem to belong to a different era (Maffesoli 1993, p. 8), namely national culture, race, and ethnicity.

The concept of culture itself, which has always played an important role in the intercultural, has been put into question and its power somewhat diminished over the last decade (Breidenbach and Nyiri 2006; Dervin and Machart 2015). Discourses on culture can easily lead to the creation of dichotomies which might emphasise the fact that some people are "good" while others are "bad"; some are "civilised", some "uncivilised"; and even: some people are late while others respect schedules. Adrian Holliday (2010), amongst others, has shown how such elements can easily lead to moralistic judgments about "the Other". For instance, the usual "dos and don'ts" lists of cultural habits, which may look harmless, often hide decontextualised negative views about the other, and sometimes about the self. These discourses also tend to allow people to easily blame "their" culture for what they do or think. In his seminal work entitled *Orientalism*, Edward Said already wondered whether "the notion of a distinct culture" is "a useful one", arguing that it could easily lead to "self-congratulation (when one discusses one's own [culture] or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the 'other')" (Said 1978, p. 325), especially in its "solid", stereotypical and acritical form. For the scholar, socioeconomic and politicohistorical categories should outweigh culture in its differentialist form (ibid.).

Difference appears to be an element which is systematically called upon when dealing with interculturality, as if this were its only characteristic. Like François

Jullien (2012, p. 29), a number of researchers have now called for a move away from this somewhat biased perspective, because "difference is not an adventurous concept" (Jullien 2012, p. 29). Emphasising difference can only lead to rather passive attitudes and experiences. Cultural difference is a bias if it is not interrelated with similarity. Said rightly argues that

> cultures and civilizations are so interrelated and interdependent as to beggar any unitary or simply delineated description of their individuality (Said 1978, p. 349).

Of course the idea of cultural hybridity is becoming increasingly popular in intercultural education, yet the use of the concept tends to refer mostly to a recent past.

The proposed paradigm of interculturality which is currently gaining strength in global research (Abdallah-Pretceille 2013; Holliday 2010) places both similarities and differences at the forefront of attention. It also agrees with Zygmunt Bauman and Rein Raud, who observe that

> "selves" come in many shapes and colours, and so do the settings, mechanisms, procedures of their production. (Bauman and Raud 2015, pp. 9–10)

I have theorised this concept elsewhere, using the label "diverse diversities": everyone, regardless of where they come from, is diverse and has to deal with their own and others' diversities on a permanent basis (Dervin 2015). Obviously, this state of diversification is a difficult one for many individuals, who prefer to retreat into their "cocoons" from where they spell out their own specificities to the *other*. In my view, this is what intercultural education should lead to: If I am ready to accept my own *diverse diversities,* maybe I can start noticing and accepting them in the *other* as well.

The objectives of interculturality in this article are to arrive at:

- a systematic and critical approach towards the concept of culture and the ideologies which are hiding underneath it;
- an emphasis on both difference and similarity/interrelations; and
- the recognition of *diverse diversities* negotiated between and within groups and individuals (processes).

Experiential learning as a support to interculturality

Experiential learning appears to be well-fitted to the proposed approach to interculturality which takes process, fluidity and diversities as its core values. As a dynamic approach, experiential learning is "driven by the resolution of the dual dialectic of action/reflection and experience/abstraction" (Passarelli and Kolb 2012, p. 139). This dialectic is essential for making interculturality more critical, reflexive, dialogic and transformative. Angela Passarelli and David Kolb (ibid.) propose six principles for experiential learning, which will guide my analysis of intercultural

encounters described in the narratives provided by the students who participated in my study:

1. Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes;
2. All learning is re-learning;
3. Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world;
4. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation;
5. Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment; and
6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge (ibid.).

I will now discuss the relevance of these principles for interculturality. Like any type of encounter, *interculturality is a fluid process*, which is dependent on interlocutors, contexts and situations and many other uncontrollable aspects such as mood, health, intertextuality, politics of identity, etc. This means that one can never be sure whether it is "successful" and/or "satisfying", since this process depends on many variables which one cannot always control. There might be, of course, milestones, for example when we start feeling at ease with an individual, or rely more on what we have in common than on mere difference. But this can shift quickly, leading to stepping back into a potentially differentialist and essentialist perspective. It is important to note that no one is immune towards these phenomena and that interculturality as an ideal can never be fully reached.

This is why the second principle of *all learning is re-learning* is essential when discussing the intercultural. Knowledge, *savoir-faire*, attitudes, skills of an intercultural nature are never acquired once and for all, but developed and re-learnt, tested, examined every time we interact with an individual or a text (in the wider sense of the word, which includes a film, a piece of art, music, etc.). Unwillingness or blindness to un-learning and re-learning can lead to an excess of self-confidence and thus to *façade* – in other words a failure of – interculturality.

The third principle, *the resolution of conflicts*, is also a stepping stone towards interculturality. "Intercultural correctness" has often banished conflict and disagreement from intercultural encounters. Out-of-tune intercultural encounters are often viewed as mere failures (Anquetil 2006). By contrast, experiential learning allows intercultural interlocutors to experience these phenomena and can lead them to reflect, act, feel and think otherwise. Conflict and disagreement can help us to revise and re-learn our ways of dealing with the *other*.

The fourth principle of experiential learning argues that learning should involve such functions as thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving, but also problem-solving, decision-making and creativity. Intercultural encounters can become more fruitful when a combination of these functions is put into practice by interlocutors and helps each of them to adapt to the situation.

The next principle refers to "the dialectic processes of assimilating new experiences into existing concepts and accommodating existing concepts into new experience" (Passarelli and Kolb 2012, p. 142) In other words, interactions between the interlocutors and their *environment* are essential. In terms of intercultural learning this means that intercultural speakers need to examine their surroundings

using their knowledge of the world, but they also need to let what they are experiencing modify their perception of these surroundings. Again, this should lead towards a fluid, changeable and negotiable approximation of interculturality.

The final principle suggests that knowledge should be seen as something which is transactional rather than pre-existent. This is why an approach to the intercultural which relies only on recipe-like *dos and don'ts* lists of cultural characteristics to be respected in order to create courteous, tolerant and "nice" encounters can easily be defective and misleading. Learners should be sensitive to the way such knowledge is co-constructed with others in specific socio-historical contexts.

Methodology

The data of this study are derived from narratives written by future teachers studying at a Finnish university. They joined a one-year intercultural teacher training programme, entitled "Subject Teacher Education Programme (STEP)" (and conducted in English),[1] after obtaining their Bachelor's degree. Before their introductory course to intercultural education began, which would be followed by a year-long array of intercultural tasks accompanying them during their in-service training, the students were asked to write five short narratives about meaningful intercultural encounters they had already experienced at this point. No definition of the intercultural was proposed and the students were free to write their narratives as they wished. Following the principles of experiential learning, these are the instructions the students were provided with:

1. Describe the experience and the process of encountering the Other.
2. Explain what you learnt (knowledge, skills and values) (see Jacobs 1999).

Seventeen students took part in the study; 85 narratives were thus collected. One-third of the students were Finnish and the rest from other countries. Having completed their Bachelor's degree, they were all at Master's level and were going to specialise in subject teaching (English, physics, mathematics, foreign languages, etc.). By means of critical discourse analysis and theories of enunciation (Angermuller 2014), I identified 46 narratives which provide evidence of intercultural learning from the aforementioned perspective: fluid approaches, and, as argued in the quotation by Foucault at the beginning of this article, "bring[ing] assumptions […] into question, shak[ing] habits, ways of acting and thinking, to dispel familiarity of the accepted" (Foucault 1994, cited in Gordon 2000, p. xxxiv). While analysing these selected narratives, I was very much interested in how they conveyed action and reflection as well as experience and abstraction. In order to respect the anonymity of the students, the names of countries, places and people have been modified. The analysis is divided into four sections: (1) Re-learning the "usual" and accepting the "unusual"; (2) Beyond appearances?; (3) Awareness of *diverse diversities*; and (4) Experiential learning and social justice.

---

[1] For more information about the programme, see http://www.helsinki.fi/teachereducation/step/index.htm.

Re-learning the "usual" and accepting the "unusual"

The selection of narratives discussed in this first section demonstrate that the students were able to question and re-learn the "usual" (what they had learnt and internalised) while accepting what was presented as "unusual" (what they did not know) in their encounter with an *other* (Passarelli and Kolb 2012).

In the first excerpt, Student 1, a foreigner, describes her arrival at the Finnish university where she was going to study. On orientation day she became acquainted with other students taking the same course. She begins her narrative by explaining that in "her culture" one shakes hands when one meets people for the first time, adding that this often occurs in specific contexts such as business and education (contextualisation). After having shaken hands with a couple of students, Student 1 turned to a male student who refused to greet her this way. She asked him why:

> I shook hands with half of the students and then there was a student that did not give me the hand and I kind of insisted because I felt that it would not be fair. But then he explained to me that according to his culture he is not allowed to shake hands with a girl. I was very surprised; I could not understand why it is not allowed. I felt embarrassed from one side because I stayed there with my hand hanging in the air and on the other side because I made him feel uncomfortable and forced him to explain himself why he cannot do this certain thing. Of course, I understand that we all have our own cultural/religious restrictions but I had in my mind that this is a very usual thing. I could not imagine that there are differences between cultures in these small and simple things.[2]

The student uses very subjective terms such as *fair, very surprised, embarrassed* and *uncomfortable* to describe the event. She seems able to weigh her own feelings ("I felt embarrassed") against those of her fellow student ("I made him feel uncomfortable"), rather than rejecting his behaviour and attitude. The coda (evaluative section at the end) of the narrative shows that the student is able to reflect on the event and on her flawed assumption that greeting people by shaking hands, "a small and simple thing" as she puts is, is very "usual" for everyone.

In the second narrative, which bears similarities to the previous one, another foreign student (Student 4) shares his surprise at professors being referred to by their first names in Finland – a practice which he claims would be "inappropriate" in his country, as it would show disrespect. Like Student 1 quoted above, he had assumed ("imagined") that this was a universal practice in the university context:

> Till then, I could not imagine a less formal relationship with the professors and I thought that everywhere is the same. So, I asked my classmate next to me to call him. It took me long time to get used to this tradition and realize that the respect is not shown in calling him by last name or names as professor or sir. This custom was so deep inside my character; it felt like it was written in my DNA because it took much time to understand the other way.

---

[2] All excerpts from the students' narratives quoted in this aritcle are reproduced verbatim.

Interestingly, this student uses the metaphor of human DNA to describe his incapacity to address professors by their first names. This biologisation of "traditions" and "customs" (note that the student does not say "culture") appears to be a common phenomenon in intercultural encounters (Hannerz 1999). The repetition of temporal aspects in the excerpt ("it took me long time to …"; "it took much time to") could be interpreted as showing how deeply ingrained the student's former behaviour was. It is important to note the help of others here, in this excerpt a classmate, to behave in a different way and to un-learn the "usual". It is difficult to gauge from this narrative whether the student finds himself able to use first names. He talks about "getting used to this tradition" and having reflected on the fact that respect can be marked in different ways.

In some of the narratives, the students reflected on the influence of one's environment on one's habits and adaptation to a new context. In the following narrative, native Finnish Student 16 describes how a group of foreigners, who were guests in his own country and whom he was accompanying, decided to go to the seaside for a swim. These people had never seen any sea before and did not know anything about sea life:

> After some time, around ten people from [name of foreign country deleted] team were screaming in pain. They had decided to go to the rocks and walk on them, in result, they had stepped on urchins and spines went inside their feet. We could not think that they do not know this, because for us growing up near the sea side was very natural and even a five-years-old kid might know that. Consequently, we spent that day at the hospital but fortunately they were not severely injured. It was to our surprise that people do not know the same things and of course it depends on the environment that you grow up.

Interestingly, this student also notes how surprised she was that there could be anyone who did not know that such accidents might happen if one is not careful. The last sentence of her narrative could be interpreted as showing that this allowed her to question her assumptions and to see the situation from an un-learned position. Unlike Student 4, Student 16 mentions the influence of the environment rather than using e.g. culture as an excuse or biologisation of behaviours and attitudes (Dervin and Machart 2015).

The final narrative, from the same student, contains what I consider to be the best example in our data of clear reflexivity on an experience made abroad. The event took place during a foreign-language immersion summer camp abroad where the student worked as an administrative and welfare assistant. She confesses that she was very surprised at the lack of reaction from her colleagues when a child was taken ill. She explains that the law is quite strict in this particular country and that she was not allowed to give any medicine to the children. This is how she expresses her feelings towards her colleagues' "passivity":

> When a child's temperature was reaching 38.5 and s/he was barely speaking, to them it did not seem like a big deal. At first, I found that almost cruel – making a child stay in class when they're burning up and probably cannot really participate in the lesson anyway. Then I realized that in [this country],

since the weather *is* often unpredictable people probably stopped paying attention to colds that were not really life-threatening and everything else has become a part of the routine. Another example of how an environment can affect the culture. I still did not come completely to terms with the idea of ignoring a child's pain when it does not fit your standard pain threshold but at least I understood from what the idea came to be. Chances are, if I stayed there long enough, I would start to feel that that is the norm as well.

Even though she notes that she did not fully accept her colleagues' way of handling the issue of the sick child, Student 16 is able to reflect on her own attitudes and beliefs, moving from her initial feelings ("I found that almost cruel") to some degree of understanding. The last sentence of her narrative might be interpreted as demonstrating that the student is aware of the fact that one can un-learn the "usual" and re-learn a new thing to be the "norm", as she puts it. As in her earlier narrative, she does not use any reference to a specific culture, but to the environment. While in the previous narrative, the emphasis was on the *others'* lack of experience with the sea, this time it is the climate.

Summing up this section, it is interesting to note that through their involvement with others and with different environments, these three students seem to realise that nothing is a "given", simple or universal. They seem to have started questioning the "usual" and, even if they don't always accept the "unusual", their experience seems to urge them to consider them as valid alternative ways of doing things.

Beyond appearances?

In this section I examine examples of how the students seem able to be critical towards appearances, able to decode what is hiding underneath them. Thus, they demonstrate that learning is a process rather than a mere set of outcomes and that it allows them to deal with opposed modes of adaptation to the world. This ties in with the subsection "Experiential learning as a support to interculturality" earlier in this paper.

The first narrative in this section here relates to the experience of being an immigrant in a new country. Before studying in Finland, Student 9 had moved from her home country to another country. She comments on the differences she witnessed especially when she met a black person (who was a classmate) for the first time. The black student became her best friend, but before that she was puzzled by her attitude and "looks". She explains:

The classmate in question had a peculiar dislike towards studying and authority which I, unknowingly, attributed to her looks. I now, of course, realize that it had nothing to do with anything other than her own personality but I, as then, am always learning. Back in my home country, the way a person presents themselves is often correlated to the way they behave and their attitudes in life. However later, and even more so in Finland, I discovered that it is not really the case. Sometimes a person with a gazillion tattoos and piercings and a Mohawk can be the most studious person in the room while someone who looks like a "goody-two-shoes" only really is concerned with

fashion and lifestyle magazines. Realizing this has also helped me to be more aware of what I pay attention to in people before I try to decide anything about them.

This narrative shows how the process of becoming critical towards one's first impressions – "calculated impressions" in the sense that they seem to have been developed through certain beliefs in one's own surroundings – takes place. The student appears to be well aware of the path she followed: she saw the black person, made a judgment based on the appearance (lazy and boisterous) and then later realised that it was not true and that the beliefs passed on to her by her "home country" had misguided her. She also relates this narrative to her observations in Finland, where something which might appear abnormal to her (tattoos, Mohawk hairstyle, etc.) is not necessarily indicative of a person's degree of intelligence, their attitude to hard work or their mentality. Student 9's reflexivity shows how she became aware not only of the shift in terms of its content, but also of the process behind the shift of her beliefs and attitudes (Passarelli and Kolb 2012).

While the previous narrative deals with the relationship between physical appearances and the mental, Student 3 in the next narrative tells the story of one of her friends in Finland who did not pay enough attention to the *other*'s reality because of her own beliefs or ways of seeing the world. In the story, a female student from America flirts with a male student from India. The latter started calling her "girlfriend" even though they were not in a relationship. For the American, it was all about play and tease, while the Indian took it seriously and even proposed to her:

It took a while for the girl to realize that even though she had been seeing it all as a game, the guy had taken it quite seriously and was heartbroken once she rejected him. This doesn't immediately mean "don't flirt with Indians", or "American girls are way too casual about flirting", but it did teach me not to take any sort of communication at face value, and to consider if the other person has the same motives in a conversation as you do. If you suspect they don't, clarify.

The narrative indicates that the student is not trying to incriminate either of the two people involved in this encounter. She also refers to a stereotype about American girls which she puts into question ("American girls are way too casual about flirting"). She thus seems to be following an approach to the intercultural which moves in the direction of fluidity (Abdallah-Pretceille 2013). The conclusion she draws ("it did teach me") also demonstrates that she has opted for an open and dialogic approach to interaction with others (Gillespie 2006) – a sign of critical skills and openness which is suggested by the fluid perspective on interculturality proposed in this article. The experience of a close friend leads her to reflect on her own interaction with others.

In the final narrative of this section, Student 12 describes the process of moving from one's first impressions and feelings to a more sophisticated way of perceiving the *other*. She met a girl at university who kept boasting about her country:

she had nothing but good things to say – in fact, a bit too good. She painted a picture of an ideal country where everyone has free education and healthcare, where everyone is happy and prosperous; in addition, she didn't fail to praise their president and party leader.

This first irritated Student 12 because she felt that the other student lacked critical skills. But then she explains that she started thinking about how her own parents and grandparents, who were from the Balkans, had done exactly the same. This reflection led her to draw this conclusion:

But then I realized, I am not the one to judge or "enlighten" her – if she is happy, good for her. Prodding into her country's murky affairs isn't a topic for a conversation over a cup of coffee anyway, and the situation in her country has nothing to do with what kind of a person she is – and we ended up becoming very good friends.

By relating the way the other student behaved about her country to what she had herself experienced at home, she is able to question her judgment and to extract the individual from the general impression the episode gave her about people coming from the other students' country. The intermingling of the two experiences can be interpreted to show that Student 12 is able to empathise with what she first found to be problematic, and is thus enabled to potentially move beyond this position.

Awareness of *diverse diversities*

One of the most important goals related to interculturality in education is that of recognising and taking into account people's *diverse diversities* (Dervin 2015). As opposed to the sometimes simplistic and politically manipulated notion of *diversity* (Wood 2003) its tautological form points at the complexity of each individual – not just the one who has crossed a national border, as the term diversity tends to indicate, e.g. arriving from a different continent in one of the Nordic countries. Becoming aware of one's plural identities – or identification, i.e. understanding identity as a process rather than a static element (Bauman 2004) – and of the intersectional work which happens whenever one person interacts with another, goes hand in hand with accepting, recognising and honouring the plurality of others. In our data, many narratives indicate that the students are in the process of re-learning this way of seeing individuals. The following excerpts also demonstrate that this kind of re-learning is the result of interactions between the narrating students, the people they meet and discuss in their narratives, and the environment in which the encounter occurs.

In the first narrative of this section, Student 4 provides a testimony of how she changed his position in relation to people from certain parts of the world. Having been employed in customer service for an Asian airline company before she decided to train as a teacher, she explains how she expected certain "nationalities" to "perform" and follow certain patterns – a typical essentialist position in intercultural encounters (Abdallah-Pretceille 2013), using clichéd assumptions:

I was expecting unsatisfied customers from Italy to be very impulsive.

However, in the narrative the student shows that she changed her mind while interacting with them.

But, surprisingly, they turned out to be talkative and a kind of relaxed. I had cases when passengers had missed their flight to [anonymised city] and had not been entitled for any reimbursement, and, still, they talked in a friendly way and even managed to tell jokes and discuss weather with me. It is really interesting how reality sometimes differs from our expectations and stereotypes.

The student then compares these Italian customers to customers from the UK, saying that she found that UK customers were unable to make a distinction between employees as individuals and their work responsibilities and often got angry at her. She concludes:

As the result of working with representatives of Italian and UK cultures, I try not to expect anything from people of other cultures, avoid preconceived notions and just keep my mind and eyes open in order to stay as objective as possible.

When she discusses her expectations of Italian behaviour, she expresses a somewhat neo-essentialist criticism of British people for being more "Italian" than "British". Yet her conclusion is good potential evidence of open-mindedness and critical interculturality.

In the next narrative, diversities apply to the self. Student 4 moved from the Balkan Peninsula to Finland a few years before the beginning of her teacher training. In her narrative, she discusses her own diversities, claiming that

my personality changes and adapts depending on which cultural environment I find myself in.

She then attributes and opposes these somewhat stereotypical characteristics to Finnish people and her "home country": *Finns*: quiet, withdrawn, unassertive, timid; *home country*: loud, hectic, open, friendly. Here is what she has to say about her double personality:

Namely, when I'm in Finland, I am a different person than when I'm in the Balkans – after having travelled back and forth many times, I have realized that. For a long time, I was wondering how come I'm having so much trouble finding friends in Finland, being my open and friendly self – then I realized that my open and friendly self is Balkan Isabella. As soon as the plane touches the ground in Helsinki, I turn into Finnish Anu who is much more unassertive and timid.

Of course one could question the dichotomisation of Finland vs. the Balkans, and the stereotypical and imagined characteristics which go with that. Interestingly, Student 4 even blames her lack of social networks in Finland on her having become Finnish (a different character from "Balkan Isabella"). But maybe the experiences

of this double self can both lead to the student accepting her "differences within her difference" (she has more than one *persona* when she is being Finnish and similarly for her Balkan identity) and, at the same time, help her to reflect on others' diversities.

In this section I have discussed signs of *diverse diversities* which permeated some of the narratives written by the students. The way they deal with this issue might appear a bit superficial at this stage, but it is a good foundation which is worth being taken into account. As suggested in this article, there is a potential for the students learning to dig deeper into their own experiential learning through formal intercultural education (provided, for example, in the course they were about to begin).

Experiential learning and social justice

By experiencing certain encounters, the students also seem to have become aware of the fact that learning is a holistic process of adaptation, which creates new (and questions old) knowledge again and again. This also ties in with the subsection "Experiential learning as a support to interculturality" earlier in this paper. This last analytical section presents narratives which reveal that students have been able to reflect on interculturality as engagement against inequality and social injustice (Layne and Lipponen 2014).

In the first narrative of this section, Student 9 tells a story from her time as supply teacher in a school in Helsinki, the capital city of Finland. On one occasion she caught white Finnish boys teasing a child from an immigrant background because of his "broken Finnish". This episode seems to have touched the student's heart. Her language is very emotional ("the situation made me sad", "I should have told the children more about how it would not have mattered if he had in fact sounded like a native-speaker", etc.). She also reflects on the fate of migrant children in Finland in the narrative and wonders "how many children with immigrant backgrounds have to put up with this daily". The student claims that the immigrant child did not, in fact, have any accent and explains that she finds it fascinating that people often imagine others to have certain characteristics when they fit the label of the *other* (Bauman 2004). Interestingly, she says that she finds it

odd that people have to highlight other people's differences – even when there are none. It is also strange how preconceptions can make one see or hear things which are not really there.

Student 9 is thus promoting an approach to the *other* which relies on the similarity– difference continuum rather than on mere difference (Dervin 2015).

In a similar vein, but in a different context (on a beach in Helsinki), a different Finnish student explains how he witnessed white Finnish kids ("no older than 11 years old") making fun of a group of immigrants, shouting things like "you should get a job!" at them. In his narrative, the student then asks a series of questions and proposes some hypotheses, at the same time showing how perplexing the event was:

Where would they learn to talk like this? Why would they even be thinking about work and money at their age? I believe the answer must lie in their

upbringing; maybe relatives or other adults. I cannot believe that children would come up with these things on their own. Some people seem to think that immigrants are living large in Finland by taking advantage of our social security system. I think it is very unfortunate that some parents pass on these kinds of prejudices to their offspring.

The influence of parents on how children see immigrants has been proven, but the student fails to factor in other important influences, such as the media, discourses at school, the Internet, politicians, etc. in Finland (Horsti and Nikunen 2013). Concluding the narrative, Student 6 seems to be ashamed of the fact that he did not intervene. But in any case this event seems to have had an impact on his capacity – and/or willingness – to engage in such situations:

I regret not intervening but I guess I was just too confused by the whole situation. At least now I know how I would react the next time I found myself in the same circumstances.

However, the student does not elaborate on *how* he would react if he witnessed this again.

Conclusion

The objective of this article was to examine the influence of experiential learning on the development of intercultural competences. In the narratives we analysed, most students demonstrated that experiential learning can lead to interesting snapshots of interculturality, understood here as a critical and reflexive approach to the *self* and the *other* which moves beyond an essentialist and culturalist perspective (Holliday 2010; Dervin 2015). On the whole, the students showed that they are able to un- and re-learn the "usual", some kind of imagined "norm", to move beyond appearances and assumptions, to look into *diverse diversities* and to pinpoint injustice. The fact that most students were able to engage with these ideas – sometimes doubtfully – without any formal intercultural training is a positive and encouraging finding.

One might argue that some of the specific examples given in this article describe fairly small "cultural differences". For instance, differences in how to greet someone, referring to and addressing people by their title or their first-name, ways of looking after a sick child, and even flirting may create dissonance. I believe that many such examples, as demonstrated in this article, may help students to un-think certain conventions and question certainties. I am also convinced that – through confrontations and surprise – students can develop a sense of critical examination and self-reflexivity. Differences might also help students to co-construct meanings with other people who can serve as mediators to explain why someone behaves in a particular way in a specific context. However, it is important for students to bear in mind and to remain careful about the fact that these "cultural differences" may also be related to other aspects of difference such as gender, social class, age, etc. rather than just ethnicity and nationality. Working from the continuum of difference and commonality "across cultures" might also lead the students to take on a more

critical stance towards differentialist biases. Noticing similarity in difference can also be very enriching.

The findings of this study carry an important message for intercultural teacher education: our student teachers do not start their studies with a "clean plate", since they have already, in some cases, a long experience of interculturality and, most importantly, have reflected and been critical towards certain misconceptions about it. Even those who have neither been in contact with the "other" nor travelled abroad are already acquainted with principles of interculturality without being aware of it. In fact, through the *diverse diversities* of their own acquaintances, groups and their indirect intercultural encounters/experiences through the media, arts, fiction and education, these students do not start from scratch. The potential of intercultural teacher education is to provide theoretical, methodological and reflexive tools to "dig deeper" into these experiences and the ways one can interpret them (see Dervin 2015; Layne and Lipponen 2014). The more the students are able to develop such skills, the readier they will be to apply them to their future career as teachers involved in our heterogeneous societies.

References

Abdallah-Pretceille, M. (2013). Towards a humanism of the diverse. *The International Journal of Education for Diversities, IJE4D, 1*, 133–136.

Angermuller, J. (2014). *Poststructuralist discourse analysis: Subjectivity in enunciative pragmatics.* Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Anquetil, M. (2006). *Mobilité Erasmus et communication interculturelle: une recherche-action pour un parcours de formation [Erasmus mobility and intercultural communication: action research for a training course].* Berne: Peter Lang.

Bauman, Z. (2004). *Identity.* Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Bauman, Z., & Raud, R. (2015). *Practices of selfhood.* Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Breidenbach, J., & Nyiri, N. (2006). *Seeing culture everywhere.* Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.

Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1988). *A thousand plateaus* [transl. by Brian Massumi]. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Dervin, F. (2015). Towards post-intercultural teacher education: Analysing "extreme" intercultural dialogue to reconstruct interculturality. *European Journal of Teacher Education, 38*(1), 71–86.

Dervin, F., & Machart, R. (Eds.). (2015). *Cultural essentialism in intercultural encounters.* Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dervin, F., & Tournebise, C. (2013). Turbulence in intercultural communication education (ICE): Does it affect higher education? *Intercultural Education, 24*(6), 532–543.

Foucault, M. (1994). Le souci de la vérité [The concern (or care) for the truth]. In D. Defert & F. Ewald (Eds.), *Dits et écrits* (Vol. 4, pp. 676–677)., 1980–1984 Paris: Gallimard.

Gillespie, A. (2006). *Becoming other: From social interaction to self-reflection.* Chicago, IL: Information Age Publishing (IAP).

Gordon, C. (2000). Introduction. In J. D. Faubion (Ed.), *Michel Foucault: Power* (pp. xi–xli). New York: The New Press.

Hannerz, U. (1999). Reflections on varieties of culturespeak. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 2*(3), 393–407.

Holliday, A. (2010). *Intercultural communication and ideology.* London: Sage.

Horsti, K., & Nikunen, K. (2013). The ethics of hospitality in changing journalism: A response to the rise of the anti-immigrant movement in Finnish media publicity. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 16*(4), 489–504.

Jackson, J. (2014). The process of becoming reflexive and intercultural: Navigating study abroad and reentry experience. In J. Byrd Clark & F. Dervin (Eds.), *Reflexivity and multimodality in language education: Rethinking multilingualism and interculturality in accelerating, complex and transnational spaces* (pp. 43–53). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Jacobs, J. (1999). *Experiential education: The main dish, not just the side course*. Boulder, CO: Association for Experiential Education.

Jullien, F. (2012). *L'écart et l'entre : Leçon inaugurale de la Chaire sur l'altérité, 8 décembre 2011* [The distance and the difference: Inaugural lesson of the Chair on otherness, 8 December 2011]. FMSH-WP-2012-03. Paris: Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme. Retrieved 30 November 2016 from https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00677232/document.

Layne, H., & Lipponen, L. (2014). Student teachers in the contact zone: Developing critical intercultural "teacherhood" in kindergarten teacher education. *Globalisation, Societies and Education, 14*(1), 110–126.

Machart, R. (2016). Asian students' intercultural preparation for academic mobility: Getting ready for diversities or reproducing the expected? *East Asia, 33*(1), 59–72.

Maffesoli, M. (1993). *La Contemplation du monde [The contemplation of the world]*. Paris: Livre de Poche.

Passarelli, A. M., & Kolb, D. A. (2012). Using experiential learning theory to promote student learning and development in programs of education abroad. In M. Vande Berg, M. Page, & K. Lou (Eds.), *Student learning abroad* (pp. 137–161). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage.

Wood, P. (2003). *Diversity: The invention of a concept*. New York: Encounter Books.

The author

Fred Dervin is Professor of Multicultural Education at the University of Helsinki (Finland). Dervin also holds professorships in Australia, Canada, China, Luxembourg and Malaysia. In May 2014 he was appointed Distinguished Professor at Baoji University of Arts and Sciences (China). Prof Dervin specialises in intercultural education, the sociology of multiculturalism and student and academic mobility. He has published over 30 books and 100 articles on identity, the "intercultural" and mobility/migration. He is the series editor of Education beyond borders: Studies in educational and academic mobility and migration (Peter Lang), Nordic Studies on Diversity in Education (with Lars Anders Kulbrandstad and Hanna Ragnarsdóttir; Cambridge Scholars Publishing [CSP]) and Post-intercultural communication and education (CSP).