"Intellectual asceticism is de rigueur, especially when Otherness is the object of discourse" (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2003: 1)

1. Introduction

This chapter proposes to deal with research on the 'intercultural' in the new era by taking seriously a renewed understanding of interculturality. For some readers, 'renewed' will probably sound pretentious as there have been many attempts at reconceptualising interculturality in similar terms over the last 30 years (cf. e.g. “Humanism of the diverse" (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2003), “Critical intercultural communication” (Piller, 2011)). Yet I feel that more can be achieved.

The understanding of the intercultural and the method applied to research it here represent a reaction against the “analytic stereotyping” that Sarangi (1994), amongst others (cf. also Kumaravadivelu, 2007; Dervin, 2011), has criticised in research, which Martine Abdallah-Pretceille sums up well in the quote at the beginning of this chapter. Briefly - we'll expand on this later on - renewed interculturality is a departure from the “absurd idea” that people adhere fully to their ‘cultural’ world without questioning it (Bensa, 2010: 36-37). Yet this idea has been commodified in research for quite a while now (Dahlen, 1997; Holliday, 2010; Dervin, 2010). Research based on this approach is interested in how people, in international contexts, negotiate and ‘do’ interculturality (cf. Abdallah-Pretceille, 1986, 2003; Meeuwis & Sarangi, 1994; Piller, 2000, 2011; Dervin, 2008, 2011).

This chapter relies on two different corpora, which fall within what R. O'Dowd (2007) calls “online intercultural exchange”, but which I prefer to call “socio-digital” interaction in reference to Coutant and Stenger’s proposal to label social network/media and/or Web 2.0 (ex.: Facebook, Twitter, Linked, etc.) (Coutant & Stenger, 2011). All the participants were from different countries and used English as Lingua Franca, with little input from other languages (French, Polish, Spanish). The two contexts under scrutiny occurred, on the one hand, in an e-platform (Moodle) and on the other, in live online webinars (Elluminate and Adobe Connect). There is no agreement today as to what applications are comprised in the terms web 2.0 and social media/network (Develotte & Dervin, forth.). According to Guth and Helm (2010: 4), “Web 2.0 means many things to different people and the answers you get to these questions (what they are) depend on who it is that you ask”. In this chapter, Moodle and Webinars are considered as sociodigital technologies.

I am examining interaction in the chat rooms in which participants interacted in both cases (3 chats in total: one in Moodle and 2 during the webinars). The following questions are asked:

- In intercultural encounters, interculturality is often ‘done’ by interactants, i.e. they can use culture and (ethnic/cultural/national…) identity elements to communicate, argue, convince and even manipulate (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2003). Ingrid Piller (2011: 172) has formulated this through transforming the usual question of “how does group X communicate?” to “Who makes culture relevant to whom in which context
for which purposes?”. I would add to the latter the concept of identity, which is equally important in intercultural communication. In socio-digital contexts, what happens in this regard? The fact that people don’t see each other (and are unable to “categorise” each other based on physical appearance or hearing a foreign accent in the case of written forms of interaction), and can easily play an “identity game” (they can pretend to be someone else, e.g. from a different country than their own, a different sex, etc.) in socio-digital media potentially complicates ‘doing’ interculturality as usual boundaries and “boxes” can become fuzzy and even confusing.

The corpora that I have chosen have different foci. The chat session in Moodle took place between two university students from two different countries (one exchange student from the Netherlands/England in Finland and a Latvian student in Riga) who had to discuss intercultural matters around the influence of Russia in the Baltic Sea Region in Northern Europe. The other chats are taken from two webinars that took place within the framework of a European project on language learning and the use of social media. The webinars were open to anyone interested and gathered each around 50 online participants. Having very different foci, it is interesting to see, as Piller suggests supra, if moments of ‘doing’ interculturality take place, who triggers them and for what purposes. It will also be of interest to propose some answers or hypotheses to the question: what is different in terms of ‘doing’ interculturality online and face-to-face?

2. From intercultural communication to ‘Doing’ interculturality: a new research era?

For the last 30 years, and increasingly today, a minority of researchers are suggesting new ways interculturality should be studied. Intercultural communication now has a long history in global research worlds (cf. Dervin et al., 2011), which has often been criticised for remaining too “structuralist”, see even “culturalist” and “essentialist” (Holliday, 2010). It is also important to note that it is researched in a complicated array of fields and subfields, which makes it difficult to map fully the ways it is conceptualised and researched. In what follows, when I talk about renewed interculturality, I’ll limit the scope to the fields of applied linguistics and ‘intercultural’ education (but I am well aware that in fields such as comparative religion or sociology of cosmopolitanism similar ideas are developed).

The renewed ways of dealing with interculturality are in line with what the field of anthropology, amongst others, has argued over the last 20-30 years, especially in relation to the concept of culture. As such from the beginning of anthropology in the 18th century until about the 1960s, anthropologists used a solid and objectivising understanding of “culture”, which has now been deconstructed and put into question (Cf. Abu-Lughod, 1991; Wikan, 2002; etc.). This understanding has had a large impact on science but also everyday life. For Briedenbach & Nyiri (2009: 19): “It is safe to say that in the general public, cultural explanations are now much more readily involved to challenge the authority of the “hard” sciences than twenty years ago, while, surprising as it is, “culture experts”, are less likely to be challenged, say, on the customs of Iraq than physicists on the safety of nuclear reactors”. While anthropologists, as we shall see below, reject this “culturespeak” (Hannerz, 1999), other fields and the general public still refer to it very much. A hierarchy in “cultures” also seems to take place between e.g. “Creole culture, hybrid forms, global universals such as MacDonald’s” and “tradition, associated with ‘roots’ and the past” (Eriksen, 2001), with which different values are associated – the latter being often considered more profound.

“The tired old notion of “culture” (Latour, 2009: 2) is still very much at the centre of understanding/explaining interculturality, especially by providing “cultures” with social
agency ("cultures meet“, “cultures clash“...). This type of discourse has been labelled “culturalism“ across academic worlds and languages (cf. e.g. Abdallah-Pretceille, 1986; Baubock, 2008; Philipps, 2010; Holliday, 2010). For Bayart (2002: xii), “it defines cultures in a substantialist manner and assumes between cultures and political action a relationship of exteriority in the form of an unequivocal causality“. Furthermore, the cultural difference that is established through it is often establishing “cultural hierarchy“ rather than “cultural variation“ (Philipps, 2010: 20). For Philipps (Ibid.), this triggers the following discourses: “There are said to be 'better' and 'worse', 'more advanced' and 'more backward' cultures”. The "deceptively cozy blanket of culture“ (Eriksen, 2001: 204), even though it is used on a daily basis when ‘doing’ interculturality, should be looked at from a different perspective by researchers on intercultural communication themselves. Of course it is quite problematic and contradictory in a sense to work on the “intercultural” when culture itself has lost its conceptual and methodological essence. But as we’ll see, researchers have to live with it and concentrate more on the "inter-" instead.

Sarangi gave a very telling and simple example of “analytic stereotyping“ in relation to “cultures“ in his groundbreaking article of 1994. He presents the following interview situation between a young Asian migrant and a British interviewer:

01 I: right mhm hm what kind of driving have you been doing in England

02 R: uhm (LONG PAUSE) it’s very good

03: I: what kind of what kind of driving though big truck or small truck in factories

04: R: eh no no I have licence only car

05: I: you have a car licence

06: R. Licence right

Sarangi asserts that a first approach, which I would characterise as culturalist, would see the long pause in the second turn as a sign of the candidate’s ‘Asianness’: his ethnic and cultural origins make him submit to the interviewer and avoid conflicts. But Sarangi wonders if there is anything conflictual in the interviewer’s first question (right mhm hm what kind of driving have you been doing in England). On the other hand, the researcher sees the situation as face-threatening, not for "cultural" reasons, but because, obviously, the interviewee’s English doesn’t seem to be good enough to answer the question without the linguistic cooperation of the interviewer (cf. what kind of what kind of driving though big truck or small truck in factories) and also because of the “symbolic power“ that the interview has – as any interview. Of course, it is easy to see how some of these "clues" cannot be fully grasped, explained or understood, which means that we need to alter the way we present research results and accept that many explanatory factors cannot be taken into account.

This is the path that we are taking in this chapter by implementing a social construction approach and, as the anthropologist Alban Bensa suggests (2010: 21), by examining the “political“ rather than the structural, i.e. "the messiness of everyday life" (Brediden... 278) and the strategies hidden behind "doing being intercultural" (Axelson, 2007; “lies”, manipulations, “facework“, contradictions... in the use of discourses of differences and cultures).
3. Revealing/repressing the ‘intercultural’ in socio-digital technologies

The first corpus described here was collected during the use of a socio-digital technology (a chat room in Moodle) in 2008. This was part of a larger experiment where 25 students, who were not always nationals of the working contexts (Finland and Latvia) – many of the participants were international students (Turku) and Russian students (Latvia; though they were born in Latvia) – were asked to meet online and discuss ‘intercultural’ discourses they had collected on Russia, Latvia, Finland and their own countries. The students in Finland had just finished an introductory course on intercultural communication. The choice of Russia as a main focus was strategic as this country represents a strong (historical) force in the Baltic area. I have chosen to focus on two chat sessions between a Dutch student (exchange student in Finland, born in England) and a Latvian student. The two chats were done in a 7-day interval; the first chat lasted 2 hours 30 and the second one 2 hours.

Places (e.g. countries), in such contexts of interaction as the one the two students had to experience, seem to retain an important “social” role in the definition, construction and enactment of interculturality. As the Dutch student is “between” three different spaces (Finland, Holland and England), when asked about the weather in "your country", he (A) told her partner (B) about the weather in two of his different “places”:

A: How is life in Riga today?

B: Today in Riga was warm, but not sunny! What about your country?

A: Well Finland was cold, wet and grey, dark early but that’s to be expected in October I suppose

B: And concerning the Netherlands I’m not sure but I doubt it was much different except the light was longer in the evening

After an hour into the first chat, the Dutch student openly reveals that, on top of his dual positions as a Dutch student in Finland, he identifies with another country (England, where he was born). However, the last sentence of the following excerpt shows that, in this declared identity, he positions himself and his own unicity (cf. “attached”) as he asserts that he feels more Dutch than English:

A: I was born in England but moved to the Netherlands so the Netherlands is my home. Interestingly this issue fits quite well with the course we do as one can ask what is a home country and what does it mean to be native to a different country. Although I was born in England I feel attached to the Netherlands and thus Dutch.

While the Dutch student seems to have no qualms about declaring his own “diversity” (or duplicity), the Latvian student, who is part of the Russian minority in Latvia (but she doesn’t mention it during the first chat), seems to be very careful in disclosing her “roots”. She seems to be carefully observing the Dutch student’s reactions and responses and trying to figure out his attitude towards Russians. Only when he repeatedly demonstrates that actually he has nothing against Russians (and that he considers negative
stereotypes and representations about them to be false), she feels safe to reveal her roots in
the second chat. Several explanations for this “masking” of one of her identities can be
proposed: this might be due to the negative image of Russia and Russians created by the
media or simply the fact that, even though the Latvian student was Russian at birth and
nationality, she felt that this was not that important for the Dutch student to know – or this
was not that important for herself. These are just hypotheses and “real” explanations cannot
be provided based on the transcripts. Follow-up interviews with the student or have the
student confront the data might have given some extra “clues” – though I feel
uncomfortable with this as it gives the impression that we could then find out about the
“truth”, while when we talk about identity, it’s all about never-ending construction
(Bauman, 2004).

In the first chat (1 hour 39 after the beginning), the Latvian student starts a
conversation on Russian friends:

B: do you have friends from Russia?
A: (...) How about you?
A: **of course**, I have Russian friends. One of them is my best friend. (...) As I said
before people are in my case I have met only kind, helpful people

Her use of the modal phrase “of course” is interesting and could reveal or at least
give a clue (if one knows that she is Russian) that she has strong links with the Russian
community in Latvia and is therefore Russian herself. One might also get the wrong
impression here that, through inserting “of course”, she projects the idea that it is normal
for Latvians to have Russian(-speaking?) friends. Her very positive attitude to Russians (and
thus her real “community” – NB the inverted comas as the term community is too simple to
reveal sociality, cf. Amit & Rapport, 2002) is also emphasized through her use of the extreme
case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) contained in “I have met only kind, helpful (Russian)
people”, which leads to very generic and exaggerated opinions about a large group.

In some other parts of the chats, she goes on to reveal that she is Russian, but the
Dutch student does not notice the clues. Still in chat 1 (20 minutes before the end), she
avoids the topic when the Dutch student starts a conversation about the tensions between
Russians and Latvians in Latvia and gives a perfect alibi: she doesn’t know anything about
politics and economy:

A: I also noticed that after Latvians’ themselves Russians are the second largest
population in Latvia proving that they will surely impact society and the way Latvia
works as well as the other Baltic states

B: I am not a good specialist in such questions as politics, economics. Sorry!

A: Well if look at it from outside the economic or political perspective how do you
feel on a personal opinion
B: my personal opinion is that not all Russians who live in Latvia want to it for their home town do not want to learn Latvian language. They say that Russia is the best place in the world. But the question is why do they stay there?

Yet, the Dutch student insists and asks for her own opinion. In her answer, she uses the pronoun they to distance herself from Russians. On the other hand, she tries to avoid generalizations, and to make the point that actually not all Russians to learn Latvian language. Her statements are contradictory, as if, on the one hand, she supports part of the Russians and at the same time, asking herself and the Dutch student "Why do they stay here?". This clearly indicates her dual positioning and the problems of identification that her situation imposes on her. Besides, she may be provoking the Dutch student’s response, to see how he would respond to the burning issue that she introduces.

In what follows the Dutch student provokes indirectly the Latvian student to reveal even more about her roots. Talking about immigration, the Dutch student puts forward a clear 'dissociative' act that he puts into Russians' mouths:

A: they feel at home perhaps
A: maybe they feel part Latvian mentally but Russian at heart
B: perhaps I respect my country, Latvian language and everything what is connected with this country

This is where the Latvian student again “drops her mask”. Even though the Dutch student is talking about Russians (being unaware that her partner is one of them), her reply clearly positions her as a Russian. Indeed, why would she then suddenly declare her “faithfulness” to her country, to Latvian culture? It is interesting that Latvia, in this turn, becomes "this country", as if she was distancing herself from it – thus avowing that she may be part of it but not entirely...

We have to wait until chat 2 (40 minutes before the end of it) before she fully confesses her double identity:

B: I liked that you don’t fully agree with some stereotypes
B: for example that there is no tension between Russians and Latvians. It is not true
A: This is proving that stereotypes are merely are a social construction used to differ people
A: yet yourself being Latvian can say that it is untrue changes this perspective
B: To tell the truth I am Russian
At that very moment, which can be considered as dramatic, the Latvian student suddenly switches to the first person: "to tell the truth I am Russian" and reveals an important part of her Self. Somehow from what she has said before, she had implied that she must be Latvian – but also Russian if one pays careful attention to her discourse. Yet, the Dutch student seemed to be so confident that she was Latvian until then. His reaction to this "piece of news" is very strong:

A: hmmm this adds an interesting dimension
A: how come you said at first to be Latvian and that the Russians don't want to work
A: when you were putting down your own people in this sense
B: I didn't even mention that I am Russian or Latvian. Where did I mention this?

After the revelation, the Dutch student seems to feel shocked at her revealed identity and asks "how come you said at first to be Latvian?". In fact, he does seem very convinced that she had identified herself as Latvian – he inferred it from her previous critical statements about Russians. In a way, if that is the case, one can understand his reaction, as he had probably trusted her to be honest with him, as he had himself disclosed his own ‘duplicity’ (England/The Netherlands).

In her own turn, she is surprised: “I did not even mention that I am Russian or Latvian" (even though she had just told him "the truth" – that's the word she used: “to tell you the truth”... as if she had been hiding something from him), as if she felt accused of cheating. A look at the transcripts actually confirms that she is right as she never said word-for-word that she was Latvian – nor Russian. After this short moment of tension and the Latvian student checking if this episode had not "ruined their relation", we can see how the Dutch student uses a strategy of sympathy (probably to help her to save face), by demonstrating that he is similar to her through reminding her of his own duplicity and declared dissociation:

B: Now everything is clear. Right?
A: in some ways amusing as we speak of Netherlands and Latvia when I am English and you are Russian

This long process of identification (3 hours 50 out of 4 hours 20) shows how complex and "discursive" questions of identity can be in interculturality. For the Dutch student, his dual/multiple identities are declared nearly from the beginning of the chats and his duality is problematised from the beginning. For the Latvian student, though she experiences the same complexity, her identities appear more refrained and contained. She doesn't declare her duality but leaves a few clues here and there and waits until she has gained full trust and the imposition of a clear "mask" from her partner’s side to reveal her duplicity.

This took place in a specific sociodigital context, how different would it have been if it occurred in a face-to-face encounter? We can only speculate here but it seems that the
question is important. First of all, had the students met (they chatted so they couldn’t hear their voices), they might have noticed (or not) a specific “foreign” accent in English – which could have potentially revealed (or not) a representation of a 1st language and/or a nationality. Besides, by seeing the other, observing him/her, the clothes s/he wears, any symbols they might have on them (a flag, etc.), they might have “guessed” each other’s identity/ies. Also depending on the place they might have met (Latvia, Finland, Russia, England, etc.) they might have had quick clues about belonging. The main difference between the sociodigital media used and face-to-face is also based on the fact that in the chat box, the students were together – no lurkers, no extra person. While in face-to-face interaction, e.g. on the streets, in a bar, etc. they might have met other people or interacted with other people who might have helped them (especially the Latvian participant) to ‘drop the mask’. Obviously, these are only speculations and they should be taken as such. Yet it is interesting to ask these questions as it shows that sociodigital encounters do alter encounters and representations one can have of the other – and representations one can project! Let us remember too that the specific context of their encounter was "imposed" on them as this was a compulsory component of a course they had taken – which cannot not have an impact and some implications on what happened.

4. The sociodigital agora: doing interculturality in public live online webinars?

This section explores the theme of ‘doing’ interculturality in a very different sociodigital context. Based on 2 live webinars that took place online in 2010, the data is not limited to two interlocutors but to around a 100 in total. The themes of the webinars differed but they were related to the use of social media in language learning (webinar 1 = social inclusion and social media; webinar 2 = language learning resources and social media media).

A webinar is a dynamic sociodigital platform for presentation which can combine various applications such as navigating through powerpoint presentation, online presentations with video and sound, interaction with an online audience through e.g. a chat box, etc. In this sense I want to call this a sociodigital agora: having registered beforehand in the particular webinars under scrutiny here, the participants can thus interact amongst themselves during a presentation and or discussion, and even ask questions to the presenters while they are talking or afterwards. Interaction in webinar appears thus to be more groupal than interindividual – unlike the previous set of exchange. People can either address a specific person in the chat box (by using e.g. @ + the name of the person) or the whole group and speakers (this is the case in most instances). The fact that interaction between the chatters takes place simultaneously with the presentations gives a very interesting dimension to the situation. One participant commented: “I feel like I am back at school chatting with my friends during class just waiting for the teacher to scold us! :-)”. But what do the participants do in the chats? Most of the time, they either comment (for each other?) and discuss some of the points made by the presenters; ‘talk’ to the presenters; share ideas, references, experiences; share some jokes; answer questions asked by the presenters, etc. As they share an interest (language learning and social media), there are many signs of intertextuality amongst them (names, “theories”, applications, etc.). In what follows, and because all the participants are from different places and most speak certainly different languages, I want to review the intercultural aspects that appear in the discussions in the chat rooms. In other words, is intercultural ‘done’ and if yes, how and for what purposes? In order to do so, I went through the transcriptions of the two chats and collected discourses that are related to interculturality.
In most cases, the participants can have an idea of where the others come from, starting by the names they use – which can of course be nicknames. Nevertheless they don’t seem to use them to “categorise” the others in the analysed webinars. The webinars usually start by either the chat moderators or the webinar organisers asking where the people are from. So the need for geographical positioning of interlocutors appears as something to be put on scene from the beginning. Actually in the 2nd chat, the moderator writes: “where are you located?”, which is not the same as where are you from?, because it doesn’t ask for “origins” as such but location. Participants usually mention the city/town and/or country where they are during the webinar (Poland, France, London, Hungary, etc.). Asked at the end of this chat by the moderator, “in which country are you RU located please?” (no explanation why), a participant replies “I am in France right now”. In the first chat, two participants explain that they are immigrants in the country where they work/study (“I am a foreigner living in Italy”; “as a person from abroad in Finland…”). Finally, a few people mention their institution. For example one participant says that he works at a college in Sweden. But the mentioning of these places does not always seem to match the “local identity” that one would attribute. The person working in Sweden mentioned earlier has a “Hispanic” looking name – which of course doesn’t mean that s/he is Swedish by birth or nationality. What is interesting thus is the fact that ‘intercultural’ signs become confusing and most importantly they are not used for categorising others during the 2 webinars.

In terms of language, it is important to note that the main language is English in both chats (it is the “official” language of the webinars). Very few people mention other languages (e.g. their 1st language or the languages they speak; one participant only mentions that she has learnt Spanish). When one reads the transcriptions, conversation seems to flow and very few instances of non-/mis-understanding were noted. The only good example I could identify was when the participants negotiated the following during a poll:

A: Ah! We have to use tick and cross!

(…)

B: is the cross a yes?

(…)

C: a tick is a yes

Of course the fact that many of the turns in the chat are either comments or questions to the speakers or single reactions to what they say is important to note. As far as language and identification are concerned, some participants use greetings in French twice: bonsoir à tout le monde at the beginning of the first webinar and bonne continuation upon leaving the webinar. Both speakers have usernames (their real names?), which are not “French speaking” (which of course doesn’t mean that they can be French, Swiss, Belgian, etc.).

There is an attempt in the second webinar to use German. One participant (C) asks the following question: “Darf man hier auf Deutsch schreiben”, which he translates in the following turn into English: “I meant can we write in german”. The following discussion ensues:

A: Warum nicht?

B: The conference is in English

C: Um so besser
C: ich glaube ja

C: but for respect to those learning another language I'll be resuming in English having two languages going on might make it easier to follow the various threads

D: but if you can't speak german you get left out

D: And I can't speak German

So it becomes clear that foreign languages can be an issue in this form of interaction, English prevails and using another language might be perceived as boundary-making and confuse people to follow (as one participant says above) "the discussion threads".

'Doing' interculturality doesn't appear to be one of the preoccupations of the participants. During both chats, I have noted only three cases, which result in categorising. The first example is about “Chinese students”:

my Chinese M.Ed TESOL students initially assume that 'using technology' means using ppts

The Chinese student is often the archetype figure of the "other", the different one in pedagogical and research discourses (cf. Dervin, 2011). Another example is a discussion around the idea that “technology is decreasing face to face contact, making islands out of people” (i.e. people create small communities). The following reactions to this were noted:

B: in many ways, yes

C: It isn't in Italy, for Italians meeting F2F is too important – may be a cultural issue

D: it might depend on where you live. I live in a very crowded palace in constant f2f situations.

The culture alibi appears in the second term. This is the only time during both webinars that it does. The final instance of 'doing interculturality' is related to the classical dichotomy between the East and West. The participants are talking about the e-platform Moodle:

A: Moodle is free

B: Is it?

C: but Moodle was/is developed in a Western 'Anglo-Saxon' context
In reaction to the presentation he heard about social inclusion in the webinar (no. 1), one chatter wrote: “I have noticed that differences can be exaggerated in CMC::: people can get into nasty arguments without the f2f means of communication”. It is quite interesting to see that within the framework of the analysed chats here, this doesn’t seem to apply as very little is said, asserted in terms of interculturality, cultural differences, cultural identity. While reading the transcript, it really seems that these people do not see each other as different beings but that they are talking and constructing discourses with just other people – even if they are all from different places and languages. The participant who was the only one who actually had a culturalist discourse on himself and the Italians actually finishes the chat by commenting on what happened during the webinar. All the speakers were women, all from different countries. Here is how she summarizes the situation: “it is nice to see a group of women discussing important issues”. This could be an indication that she doesn’t consider the webinar to have been intercultural (in the ‘doing’ interculturality sense) even though people from different countries and languages were interacting.

How would this have differed in face-to-face interaction? Once again these are hypotheses. Let us imagine for a moment that the people who took part in the webinars had met at a conference. Just like the previous case of sociodigital encounters, seeing the other, listening to her/his accent, seeing his/her face, etc. might have influenced their discourses. Of course, the main emphasis during the conference would most certainly have been the topic to be discussed. I assume that small interest groups could have formed (if there are e.g. 50 people) to which people might have “pegged” (Bauman, 2004) in terms of languages, countries, geographical position, at random, etc. Having to spend time physically together might trigger more ‘doing’ interculturality discourses, especially if one has the time to discuss in depth, argue, etc. It is in these situations that e.g. the ‘culture-alibi’ (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1986) emerges – “in my culture/country we do” cf. Baumann (1998).

5. Conclusion

The two sociodigital contexts of encounters under scrutiny in this chapter diverged amply, in terms of social interaction, objectives, duration, etc. The first type can be labelled “sociodigital cocoon”, where two individuals from difference places are asked to work together and negotiate, co-construct discourses. No other people shared the virtual space that they used to interact. The cocooning meant that they could concentrate on what they both had to say and construct discourses, which led to the recognition of each other’s plural identities. The process took time, especially for the Latvian student, but it ended on a vision of interculturality, which I consider to be “renewed”. That is both students seem to notice
that what happened between them in this sociodigital environment is that they constructed together various images of the self.

The second sociodigital context corresponds to what I called a “sociodigital agora”. In this type of environment, people were gathered not really to “meet” but to attend a seminar online on a topic that they were – most certainly – all interested. The fact that these people started to use the chat application to “talk”, share ideas, comment, ask questions, etc. is a by-product of the situation. ‘Doing’ interculturality was limited in this second sociodigital context. This represents, I believe, an important blow to ‘canonical’ research on intercultural communication: even though all these people came from different spaces and had different languages, interaction was smooth and very little ‘doing’ being intercultural occurred. Trying to analyse these situations from a differentialist/culturalist point of view is impossible: as such there were no signs of “culture” or “cultural differences” (Barbot & Dervin, 2011), but only a few hints at “culturalist discourses”. This is an important result as it tells us that we need to look somewhere else to analyse such situations... and thus act within ‘intellectual asceticism’ (cf. Abdallah-Pretceille at the beginning of this chapter). The first corpus differed in that sense, but we need to bear in mind that the main point of the experiment was to talk about interculturality so in that sense it was biased. Yet we see that interculturality is not taken at face value (there were no discourses such as you’re from Holland so you are... I live in Latvia so I... in my culture we...) but it is dealt with in a constructivist and negotiable manner by the two students.

We have also discussed the potential differences between such ways of encountering the Other and face-to-face interaction. It has become clear that the fact that the people interacted only through a written form (chat) could have influenced the ways interculturality was ‘done’ (or not ‘done). Again, had the people been face-to-face ways of categorising the other would have been expanded and might have led to more intercultural discourses. But we need to be careful with this somewhat deterministic argument: even though ‘doing’ interculturality is very common, it doesn’t mean that it is systematic... It is also a problematic argument as it seems to contribute to the dichotomising of “online encounters” and “face-to-face encounters” which is more and more questioned (cf. e.g. Turkle, 2011).

Bibliography


