Quality in intercultural education: the development of Proteophilic Competence
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Over the last two decades, the world has become more pluralistic than ever (Augé, 1994: 127). Links with people from other countries have increased tremendously and virtual, mental or physical hypermobilities (Adams, 1999) have become daily realities (for better or worse) for most people. All these elements are encouraging people to become more and more interested in intercultural communication and education (Suomela-Salmi & Dervin, 2006: VI). *Intercultural communication, intercultural awareness and interculturality* are some of the omnipresent buzz-words prevalent in the media, in the educational sphere, in advertising and also in scientific circles. Often understood and theorized in different ways – or not defined at all – intercultural communication has turned into a large ‘culture-shock prevention industry’ (Hannerz 1992: 251) which strives to ensure the smooth functioning of intercultural encounters. Many people and groups (scholars, NGOs, politicians, etc.) endeavour to help people to meet the Other by sharing reflections, recipes and sometimes what Abdallah-Pretceille calls ‘grammars of difference’ (2003: 13).

My contribution concentrates on interculturality in the educational sphere and looks at quality in intercultural education, or at what I refer to as deconditioning, strategies to face Otherising and Self-Solidification. My answer to these in education, proteophilic competence, is explicated and ways of implementing it envisaged.

1. Culturality and identification in liquid times

“Growing up is not easy. Growing up as an immigrant, juggling between two cultures while trying to find your own identity, is even more complicated” (Six Degrees – English language Magazine, www.6d.fi, September 2006)

This quotation, taken from a magazine published in English for immigrants in Finland, shows that the key-terms of culture and identity often emerge when people talk about or are involved in intercultural communication and education. In intercultural contexts, such as that of immigration in the quotation, culture is usually understood as ‘shared habits, beliefs and values of a national group’ (Kotter, 1996: 188), which brings about a rather too imaginary, homogeneous, limited and solid picture of national groups (Dervin 2006, Abdallah-Pretceille, ibid.). The quotation says that an immigrant "juggles" between two cultures, i.e. the national culture of his/her home country and the national culture of the "host" country.

This type of conception (which is very common) lays down psychological ‘boundaries’ between interlocutors as individuals are perceived to be simple ‘cultural1 dopes’ (Garfinkel 1967: 67), who only act in such or such manners because they belong to a national group. People are often instructed that they should learn these (pseudo-) national and/or religious characteristics to be able to communicate with the Other and facilitate encounters. The nation-state is in itself a ‘sociopolitical and legal category’, which has neither an ethnic (Inokuchi & Nozaki 2005: 66) nor a homogeneous basis.

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1 I am tempted to add "religious dope" in reference to current visions of some religions.
Thus, it cannot serve as a reference in intercultural communication. The same probably goes for religion.

Furthermore, the concepts of culture and identity should be considered as multidimensional and unfixed, in agreement with Bauman’s image of liquidity as a description of the current zeitgeist (2000). In liquid times, individuals ‘navigate’ between countless different and sometimes contradictory, cultures (sexual, generational, professional, educational, the media), groups (cf. tribes in Maffesoli (1997)) and witness an excess of complex identities entangled in ‘connections’ (branchements) (Amselle, 2001). As such, one could say that everyone’s culture turns into culturality - an incessant creation of culture – and everyone’s identity into identification (Hall & du Gay, 1996). What I call solidification (of the Self and the Other) represents the opposite trend.

2. Intercultural imagination: Otherizing and self-solidification

As we live in a world in which we constantly meet people in either physical or virtual forms, we need to ‘identify’ (i.e. have the ability to recognize and differentiate), to generate a solid identity and enact what I call intercultural imagination every time an encounter occurs. In this «complex pastiche of relationships, choices and acts enacted in a variety of parallel and overlapping contexts» (Barney, 2004: 151), positive and/or negative impressions based on sclerosed (fixed) and heuristic (changeable) stereotypes of the Other (Guernier 2001, cf. Legros et al. 2006: 107), are multiplied, as it is not possible for us to grasp the complexity and multi-memberships of all the people we meet (Abdallah-Pretceille, ibid.). We tend to reduce the Other to mere stereotypes when we talk about them, due to a variety of influential factors: the media, our educational background (e.g. history and foreign language learning lessons), what we have heard from family and friends and from foreigners themselves. In this sense, national identity, which often pops up in intercultural communication, has a ‘discursive deus ex-machina flavour’. These reactions are the flip side of the coin of liquid times and will be referred to as ‘Otherizing’. On the other hand, individuals tend to ‘narrate themselves’ in different (personal, social, societal, international) contexts and with different interlocutors. This is due to the fact that identity and representations of the Self and the Other are obligatorily created through interaction with others and cannot always be predicted (Taylor 1998). In the remainder of my paper I refer to this phenomenon as ‘Self-solidification’. As a consequence, the idea that an individual has an authentic, homogeneous and unified self is pure fantasy (cf. quotation in 1.; Taylor ibid.) because our identification (who we are) is shaped through the superpersonal (i.e. other people) (Ledrut, 1979: 56). In short, intercultural communication leads to solidification of the Other and the Self as well as to the creation of intercultural imagination through discourse. The next sections explore how one could try to overcome these phenomena.

3. Approaches to Otherness in education

Over the past two decades, varied trends have rapidly developed (Infante et al., 1997: 435) in regard to dealing with intercultural communication in the educational spheres. Basically two trends will be advanced in this section, which will be labeled, culturalist and interculturalist. My understanding of these two concepts corresponds to what
Gudykunst and Nishida (1989: 10) define as the objectivist/subjectivist approaches and what Ogay refers to as the English-speaking vs. French-speaking approaches (2000: 11). Whilst utilizing Ogay’s categorization, it is important to assert that many English-speaking researchers use the interculturalist approach that I am going to describe and vice-versa. The reader should bear in mind, therefore, that there is not such a clear-cut division between both these trends.

In order to give an idea of the different epistemologies covered by the two approaches in education, it is constructive to refer to Abdallah-Pretceille (2001: 138), who tells us that approaching Otherness is often based on the following question: «what do we need to know about the Other or about her/his culture in order to communicate effectively with them?». This corresponds to what I call the culturalist approach to intercultural communication: culturalists put forward strategies that can help people to communicate better in intercultural terms by providing knowledge (savoirs) about interlocutors’ cultures (usually national) (Dervin 2006; Ogay, ibid.). Culturalists concentrate solely on inter-individual interaction that tends to lead to intercultural imagination - a determinist and essentialist approach to Otherness, which ignores the fact that people belong to different social groups (cf. supra). Even though many culturalists refer to their work as being intercultural, the image that they give of intercultural communication is that of an encounter between two ‘static’ cultures, encountering rather than that of complex and liquid individuals. In their use of the adjective intercultural, the first part of the word appears to mean anything but the creation and co-construction of an interculture (inter-culturality) between interlocutors. Besides, they are sometimes akin to what Keesing (1989) calls «dealers in exotica», or in other words, they try to sell Otherness (cf. Dáhlen (1997) about the culturalist industry). In their approach, (national) culture tends to leave individuality and liquidity behind (Winkin 1994).

Returning to Abdallah-Pretceille’s above-cited question, a second attitude to intercultural encounters can be summed up with another question posed by the French scholar: «How do individuals use culture – theirs and that of their interlocutors – or, more precisely, how do they use fragments of these cultures in order to communicate?» (ibid.). This is what interculturalists try to do by considering the complex nature of individuals and by not imposing onto them fixed identities or cultural features. They attempt to explain and justify the fact that these elements can be used in interaction in order to construct persons and identities (Lorreyte 1989: 263) within a certain socio-cultural context and over a certain period of time. Interculturalists study how people construct their identity (i.e. how they identify) in different contexts.

4. Proteophilic competence: the key to intercultural education?

In this section, I wish to define what I consider to be one of the answers to the main obstacles to intercultural awareness and understanding, i.e. Otherizing and Self-solidification. Referring again to Zygmunt Bauman’s work (1993), I wish to call it proteophilic competence2 – or the appreciation of differences in multiformity of Others and Self. I believe that developing this competence can help us to deal with times that

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2 Some scholars have been talking about intercultural competence (the reader will refer to e.g. Michael Byram’s rich work on the topic (1997, 2001).
have been described as hypermodern and face individualisation of references and cognitive complexity.

Five elements compose this competence and should find their way into educational curricular across all disciplines:

- 1. The awareness that (national) cultures and identities can be a Deus ex-Machina in encounters between individuals, especially in encounters between people from different countries or religions.
- 2. The capacity to notice and act upon when someone is solidifying her/his discourse and trying to manipulate you, i.e. “[h]ow (...) individuals use culture theirs and that of their interlocutors or, more precisely, how do they use fragments of these cultures in order to communicate?” (Abdallah-Pretceille in Kelly et al. 2001: 137).
- 3. The genuine belief that every single individual (including oneself) one meets is liquid (sex, age, religion, status in society, etc.), and that s/he adapts to different contexts and interlocutors and wears masks accordingly.
- 4. The awareness that people are human beings and that they are in good/bad moods, have personal problems, feelings (they may not like you for other reasons than your nationality), preferences, and that nationality has nothing to do with the ways people are treated by others.
- 5. An avoidance of ethnocentric, racist, xenophobic or xenophilic comments (i.e. one’s culture or identity are superior to Others’).

These elements are ideal and can rarely be achieved all at the same time. The students need a lot of training and experimentation in their own countries or outside their borders to be able to reach some of them. What is more, Proteophilic competence is very unstable in the sense that individuals are under the influence of a number of factors whenever they communicate and interact: objectives of the interaction act, moods, health, weather, contexts, shared past with interlocutors, language competencies, etc. All these have an impact on acts of interaction. Finally, it is obvious that every single individual has proteophilic competence (how would they survive in societies where strangeness is a norm?) and can/cannot develop it.

5. Concluding remarks: How to implement proteophilic competence?

The first obvious option is to move away from the culturalist paradigm described in 3. Information on the other (cultural and/or religious information) cannot but create expectations and misunderstandings, as well as essentialize encounters. On the other hand, Know-how is, in my opinion, more important and should be implemented through tasks on Otherizing and Self-solidification. If students realize that they are themselves (or their peers) pluralistic, they are bound to accept more easily that the Other also is pluralistic. The first step to developing proteophilic competence is through what I call deconditioning (Dervin 2003, 2006) or the study of how Self and Other are seen, constructed, co-constructed and negotiated in different contexts (in the media, on the Internet (chats, e-mail discussions, etc.), in advertising, in everyday talk, ethnographic

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3 Act refers to the fact that interaction leads to “theatricality” and “identity games”.
tasks (Roberts et al. 2001), etc.). The second step is a training to discourse analyses and linguistic pragmatics which are, to my mind, at the centre of proteophilic competence. Both fields allow to examine the creation and instability of discourse (e.g. by looking at the use of personal pronouns, represented speech, etc.) and to note manipulations, contradictions in claims of membership or differentiation, hyper-subjectivity, etc. Of course, these two fields can be integrated in curricula without having to turn all students into specialists. The third step is education to the media. It is essential, in liquid times when identities and cultures are reduced to homogeneities, that people learn to deconstruct the discourses and images introduced by the media. Finally, all these are encapsulated by the idea that students should be able to transmit and “teach” their know-how to the people around them and take position. This would contribute to responsible intercultural citizenship (cf. Alred and Byram 2006).

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