

7 Addressing empathy in intercultural virtual exchange: a preliminary framework

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Abstract

Empathy is widely perceived and understood as an unquestioned component of Intercultural Competence (IC). The authors see the ability to empathise with others and to see their point of view as an important condition for developing an ethnorelative viewpoint, and therefore consider it important to incorporate activities into the intercultural communication curriculum that addresses the affective side of IC (Calloway-Thomas, Arasaratnam-Smith, & Deardorff, 2017; Guntersdorfer & Golubeva, 2018). In their paper, the authors discuss the importance of meta-cognitive tasks by creating opportunities for students where they can describe, share, and evaluate emotions. Based on the recommendations made by O'Dowd (2016), Byram, Golubeva, Hui, and Wagner (2017) about designing and implementing virtual exchanges (VEs), the authors present a preliminary framework, i.e. a sequence of self-reflective meta-analysis tasks that they developed for the intercultural VE between students at Ludwig-Maximilians University (LMU) in Germany and their peers at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) in the United States. This framework can be adapted to a variety of online teaching contexts.

Keywords: empathy, intercultural competence, critical (self-)reflection, virtual exchange.

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1. Introduction

In this world of intensified global mobility, international exchange, and multicultural exposure, IC has become a necessary competence for mastering every-day life. Typically seen as a set of components related to knowledge, skills, and attitudes, IC is slowly becoming an integral part of the curriculum, not just in westernised societies, but also all over the world. Regardless of which intercultural model you find most plausible and practical, or which model fits into your theoretical understanding, the elements of IC listed and defined in most frameworks suggest only ‘positive’ personal traits, attitudes, and skills. Among these normative attitudes are components which refer to the emotional set-up of people, such as flexibility or tolerance for ambiguity, to mention the two most cited elements (e.g. [Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009](#)). Knowledge about other cultures’ languages, values, norms, rules, and strategies of communication is necessary when people want to understand other mind-sets and try to act accordingly in order to achieve their goals. However, for appropriate actions and reactions, people need more than that. For a successful intercultural encounter, or a mutual understanding between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, the affective side of the interaction, i.e. emotions, plays a crucial role.

Critical research in psychology discusses empathy as a rather multifaceted phenomenon with its positive and negative sides (i.e. [Bloom, 2016](#); [Breithaupt, 2017b](#)). Nevertheless, it is listed in most IC models as one of its essential components (e.g. [Bolten, 2007](#); [Deardorff, 2006](#); [Fantini, 2009](#); [Gudykunst, 1993](#); [Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998](#)). Understood as a Janus-faced emotion with a good side and a bad side, empathy has been analysed by scholars from different fields as one of the essential topics in the social and behavioural sciences (see e.g. [Bloom, 2016](#); [Breithaupt, 2017a, 2017b](#); [Calloway-Thomas, 2009](#); [Epley, 2014](#)). Indeed, empathy can be considered as a very important attitude and skill when it comes to teaching and learning because it helps to ‘feel with’, or to co-experience with another person. For leading class discussions and facilitating learning successfully, teachers need to be able to relate to their students’ emotional situations, and it is extremely difficult for students to learn

in a classroom setting when they do not cognitively understand their teachers' intentions and emotional set-ups. Despite this axiom, there is a significant gap in pedagogical practice with regard to hands-on tools for developing empathy in a systematic way, and not just as an additional outcome of IC development, which may either happen or not while engaging students in intercultural classroom activities. The authors of this paper are making an attempt to develop a sequence of tasks for developing their students' empathy through transatlantic intercultural VE.

2. Theoretical framework: why empathy is so important for someone to become interculturally competent?

The ability to interpret and understand others' emotional cues through mindful practices plays a determining role in interpersonal interactions, particularly when interlocutors come from different cultures (e.g. Guntersdorfer & Golubeva, 2018; Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019). If such an ability is missing and one fails to 'read' emotions in either verbal or nonverbal communication, it may lead to misinterpretations with or without different cultural values and perspectives (Breithaupt, 2017a).

From the angle of IC, empathy is "the ability to regulate emotions, cope, and react appropriately in an intercultural encounter" by understanding and interpreting the feelings of the communication partner, who has a different cultural background and mind-set (Guntersdorfer & Golubeva, 2018, p. 57). Besides that, there is a certain reciprocity – a 'feeling with' (German *Mitgefühl*) – which is based on a mutual perception of the emotional state of the other person (Guntersdorfer & Golubeva, 2018, p. 57). According to Byram (1989), empathy is more demanding than tolerance in that "it requires understanding, *an activity* rather than a passive acceptance; *it requires change of viewpoint, which has to be worked towards, engaged with*" (emphasis added, p. 89). Therefore, when intercultural trainers and teachers aim at the development or at the enhancement of IC, the topic of empathy can provide a valuable teaching objective.

3. Methodology: developing a preliminary framework for teaching empathy in intercultural communication classrooms

The main goal of the students' activities the authors have designed is to build (intercultural) empathy through participation in a transatlantic VE. Ideally, following [Byram et al. \(2017, p. xxxviii\)](#), this collaboration will meet the criteria set for a 'good' intercultural VE, that is to:

- create a sense of international identification with learners in the international exchange;
- challenge the 'common sense' of each national group within the international exchange;
- develop a new 'international' way of thinking and acting (a new way which may be either a modification of what is usually done or a radically new way); and
- apply that new way to 'knowledge', to the 'self' and to the 'world'.

Besides these principles, there is also some criticism regarding VE that should not be neglected when setting up a VE (see [O'Dowd, 2016, p. 275](#)), as enumerated below.

- There is a danger for lack of authenticity when learners interact with each other in such settings ([Hanna & de Nooy, 2009](#)).
- VE can involve a false impression of universality in online communication (see [Kramsch, 2009, 2014](#)).
- There can not be enough opportunities for participants to reflect ([Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013](#)).

All three of these potential dangers can become critical when teachers think about building an emotional relationship between students, who have never met in person and may never see each other. Therefore, as suggested by Richardson (2016), the authors have carefully planned the collaboration, laid out on the theoretical overview of the issue of empathy and emotional intelligence (see Guntersdorfer & Golubeva, 2018).

In the proposed activities, students from LMU and UMBC will be involved in a series of (self-)reflective meta-analysis tasks, i.e. they will be provided opportunities to become skillful at describing and expressing their emotions by spending more time on personal reflections (see for more details and ideas Guntersdorfer & Golubeva, 2018, p. 59), and they will be prompted to focus their attention on the affective reactions of their VE-partners by regular survey questions.

Given that both classes (at both LMU and UMBC) are multicultural, students first have to share within their own class their diverse views on a selected critical issue. The topic can be a current socio-political event, or an international turmoil that has been in the centre of the social media attention in both countries. Currently, for example, there is an extensive discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic: how different governments deal with this situation and how people in different cultures react to this. Also, the topic can be a significant historical event in which both countries were involved, preferably on opposing sides (e.g. World War II). Other interesting ideas can be found in Byram et al. (2017), Lantz-Deaton and Golubeva (2020), and Porto, Golubeva, and Byram (forthcoming). Choosing an emotionally loaded critical issue is crucial for VE because they prompt students to express their feelings. Before interacting with their transatlantic peers, students will be involved in group work at their own institutions. The sequence is based on class discussions, virtual presentations, and, most importantly, on four critical self-reflection surveys that are done after each step of the sequence. The framework may include the following stages below:

- **setting small groups** within the ‘country’ class and choosing the topic (see for examples of such topics in Byram et al., 2017); and

- **analysing the selected historical or socio-political event/situation and presenting the results of the analysis within the ‘country’ classes.** This can be done in two steps, as explained below.

In the first step, facts of the historical event are to be collected. What is important is that students find articles and/or film materials (on YouTube and social media) that reflect diverse (political and/or cultural) points of view. Students collect the requested information as a home assignment, and based on that, prepare a ‘fact sheet’ as a small group assignment. They are explicitly requested to include in this sheet only facts and description of the event/situation, and avoid any interpretation or evaluation.

In the second step, they share opinions and interpretations of it, followed by a description of the emotional reactions that people participating in that event might have experienced (or are experiencing). This approach is based on the famous Describe-Interpret-Evaluate (D-I-E) exercise by Janet [Bennett et al. \(1977\)](#). The main challenge students might encounter here is working with biased presentations of realities in the media, but the authors hope that collecting material from diverse sources can develop their students’ critical thinking skills.

- **Completing the critical self-reflection survey #1** with the following questions: *Describe the emotions of the people who participated in this event. How do these emotions affect you? What is the most applicable emotion you feel? How do you feel during the small group work? How did other students feel during the small group work?* The questions here should be open-ended, and students are requested to describe the involved emotional states in their own words. The expected outcome is that through completing this and other surveys, students exercise self-reflection and thus develop their empathy.
- **Comparing different interpretations and evaluations** by working on a ‘shared consensus’ within the ‘country’ class. This might be a challenging task for students because they are requested to present the

opinions of others – even if they differ – in a respectful way and find ways in how these diverse opinions can be presented in the form of a ‘consensus’ (i.e. a page-long summary).

- **Completing the critical self-reflection survey #2**, which contains these questions: *How did you feel working in the ‘country’ class? What do you think other students felt during the group work? Can you remember your emotions well? Do you think you can recollect well the emotions of other students?*
- **Presenting the ‘country’ class view on the historical or socio-political event to their transatlantic peers**, by sharing with their transatlantic peers project products developed in Phases II and IV, before a video conference meeting is organised. Students from two ‘country’ classes are matched in teams of three to five students, so that everyone is provided with an opportunity for active participation.
- **Reflecting on others’ views, and suggesting a consensus**: after video conference meetings, the collaborating classes have to reflect on the project products of their transatlantic peers. Students can be provided some prompt questions such as: *How is the presentation of the VE-partners different from yours? Which details of the event are presented very similar to yours and which differ from our/your point of view?*
- **Completing the critical self-reflection survey #3**, which focuses on the emotional affects during and immediately after the presentation. The students have to describe their emotions and the emotions of their transatlantic peers during the presentations and explain and reflect on what was the most problematic in describing (verbalising) emotions. *Have your emotions related to this event changed during this project? Why, or why not? Do you think that after having completed this project you better understand how others feel about this historical event? To what extent do you think your empathy has been developed as a result of participating in this VE? How do you know it? Please elaborate.*

- **Suggestions for a ‘consensus’ document jointly created by the two classes**, as both classes work on a joint document (a Google Docs), which represents their diverse views on the discussed event. Although it can be a challenging and labour-intensive exercise, it teaches students how to include alternative interpretations into their descriptions. The main idea of this phase is to learn to value diverse perspectives.
- **Debriefing and evaluating the VE**; after the ‘consensus’ document is created by the VE partners, students can question and evaluate the activities in an online class forum discussion.
- **Completing the critical self-reflection survey #4**, which asks students about their overall impressions about the VE and draws their attention, as in all the previous steps, toward the description of the other students’ emotional reactions. Important questions of the survey are: *How do you feel about this exchange in general? What do you think other students felt about this VE? What did you learn about your emotional mind-set?*

4. Conclusion

In this very short paper, the authors made an attempt to briefly address the issue of developing *empathy* in intercultural virtual classrooms. The authors argue that more attention should be paid in the field of intercultural communication to this very promising topic. Developing exercises which promote explicitly the development of emotional intelligence, in general, and empathy, in particular, would not only enrich the repertoire of intercultural training but can also serve as useful tools for the training of perspective taking. The authors’ primary research objectives with this intercultural VE are (1) to adjust the already existing training methods in order to fit *empathy* into the curriculum of intercultural education; and (2) to investigate and try out the ‘cultural fit’ of these new teaching methods (i.e. teaching *empathy* within different cultural groups, contexts, and settings). The authors also plan to verify the usefulness and the effectiveness of this

preliminary framework by conducting pre- and post-VE assessment of their students' empathy. The points mentioned above show the scope of the questions which should be targeted by intercultural education researchers and practitioners in the future.

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