Exploring Neighbourness and Intercultural Challenges in Higher Education: Views of Teachers and Students

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Abstract: The need for neighbourness and Intercultural competences in Higher Education Institutions is ascending. This is because in recent times, there has been an increase in multicultural classrooms driven by globalization and the growth in global Internet connectivity. Globalization has enabled increased human mobility across physical national and cultural boundaries; while Internet connectivity has enabled virtual contact, interactions, and collaborations between persons from different cultures. Physical mobility, specifically for study abroad, results in physical multicultural classrooms. The purpose of this study is to provide an overview into the relevance of neighbourness in a multicultural classroom and challenges in a classroom that denotes the absence of neighbourness. The challenges are inspired and extracted from one-on-one Interviews with Higher Education Institution (HEI) teachers and foreign students from Finland, Italy, Denmark, Germany, Latvia and Turkey. Twenty people were interviewed. In the multicultural classrooms, six different challenges were identified as a result of analyzing the interview data. Those are language barriers, misunderstanding of cultural dispositions towards others, asymmetric communication, differences in cultural behavioral norms governing interactions, different styles of learning and problem with the familiarization with technology.

Keywords: Neighbourness, Intercultural challenges, Higher education

Introduction

The need for neighbourness and Intercultural competences in Higher Education Institutions is on the ascendency. This is because in recent times, there has been an increase in multicultural classrooms driven by globalization and the growth in global Internet connectivity (Sutton, 2005; Sleeter & Tettegan, 2002). Globalization has enabled increased human mobility across physical national and cultural boundaries; while Internet connectivity has enabled virtual contact, interactions, and collaborations between persons from different cultures. Physical mobility, specifically for study abroad, results in physical multicultural classrooms. Students who for one reason or the other cannot migrate physically to another country to study are able to sign up for virtual courses if they have access to the Internet. As a result, the virtual class can also be multicultural. However, in the toolkit, the emphasis will be on the physical classroom. Nevertheless, studies have shown that some foreign students lack intercultural competences, which makes it difficult for them to adapt to their new learning environment (Gritsenko, et al., 2021). Some studies also point to the fact that ethnocentricity does make it difficult for some local students to develop intercultural sensitivity (Fabregas-Janeiro, Kelsey, & Robinson, 2011), hence resulting in their lack of intercultural competence. A foreign student can also express intercultural insensitivity as well. Intercultural insensitivity is an aspect of intercultural communication competence (Chen, 2010) and indicates the absence of neighbourliness. There are also studies that point to the need for a global citizenship course in tertiary education as a means of developing the intercultural competence of students (Hayden, McIntosh, Sandoval-Hernandez, & Thompson, 2020).

The Importance Intercultural Competence for Teachers and Students in Multicultural Classrooms

Teachers and students, be they foreign or local, that exhibit intercultural competence possess the requisite skill, knowledge and attitude that enables them to communicate effectively and appropriately in multicultural classrooms (Deardorff, 2006; Di Mauro & Bolzani, 2020). These teachers and students possess cognitive and emotional levels that support their ability to recognize and to adapt appropriately during intercultural encounters within the classroom. Such adaptations, as pointed out by Deardorff (2006), include adaptability to different forms of communication and mannerism expressed by teachers or students from different cultural backgrounds within a multicultural classroom. Hence, the possession of intercultural competence in students and teachers be they foreign or local will lead to:

- Limited misunderstandings during verbal and non-verbal interactions within the classroom.
- Mutual knowledge creation, knowledge exchange, knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer processes, between the teacher and the student; and between foreign and local students, in the classroom. The scope of such knowledge will be divergent, ranging from knowledge on the subject matter taught in class, to knowledge as to the applicability of the subject matter in different cultural contexts.
- The reduction in ethno-centric behavioral patterns.

Despite the enumeration of the listed outcomes, it is important to note that achieving ultimate intercultural competence is impossible. This is because the nature of intercultural competences is always processual (showed in interactions) and situational. The evidence of a person's intercultural competence manifest during interactions between persons from different cultural backgrounds. There are instances where a person will come in contact with people from cultures, he/she is not familiar with and my not know how to act towards such persons. In such instances, a person with some level of intercultural competence will be open to gaining knowledge, developing skills and attitudes relevant to reaching out to the individual from the new culture. An attempt to reach out could be to ask questions in order to learn about the person from the new culture. As an example, in a film production classroom, the local teacher or student may break the ice by asking questions about film production in the country of origin of a foreign student. In providing the answers, the foreign student will reveal some cultural aspects influencing movie production in their country. The ice breaking exercise then opens up possibilities for future interactions and learning from each other. However, this will be the development of an additional intercultural competence over time. As such, the development of intercultural competence is a continuous process that is subject to continuous improvement.

Conversely, in multicultural classrooms where some teachers and students lack intercultural competence, there are certain attitudes that will be visible. Some examples of these attitudes include, lack of openness to other cultures, cultural stereotypes, the inability to tolerate ambiguity and the misunderstanding of verbal and non-verbal cues etc. (Sarı & Yüce, 2020; Di Mauro & Bolzani, 2020). These attitudes, among others, are because of either the lack of cultural awareness (knowledge) and/or skill set required for intercultural interactions in a multicultural classroom. The skill set here are those needed to observe, listen, evaluate, analyse one's level of cultural sensitivity, with the aim of improving, during intercultural encounters in a multicultural classroom. Such intercultural encounters could be between the local teacher and foreign student, foreign teacher and local students, or between local students and foreign students. The context of the encounters could be during groups' activities such as group assignments, project group work or at an interpersonal level within the classroom.

The absence of Intercultural competence in multicultural classrooms, by either the teacher, students or both, also has its own consequences. Some of these consequences include:

- Students cluster with persons from similar backgrounds. When either foreign or local students find it difficult to interact with each other within the class, they fall back to the familiar. Hence, they are more likely to cluster, except in rare cases where the number of foreign students in the class is few. However, in a class where there are groups of international students with common nationalities or culture, then the cluster becomes divided further. The cluster provides the student with a safe space to interact without being judged or misunderstood.

- The break in knowledge exchange, knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer between students. This occurs if a student group from a certain culture feels lonely or only interacts within his/her cluster. The challenge here is that students are more likely to contextualize what they study within their familiar context. For international students, they will learn about the applicability of what they study in their local culture and within the culture they study. However, their knowledge will be limited as they may

either lack understanding or possess the wrong impression in explaining the reason behind what they observe as examples. This is where one can see the importance of a local student who provides a deeper explanation behind the phenomenon the foreign student observed. However, local students will be at the disadvantage, as they will not have the opportunity of learning about the applicability of what they study in other cultures. In circumstances where they read about the problems in other cultures, they may misunderstand or hold a wrong impression about the problem. This is where knowledge from the relevant foreign student comes in handy. Hence, the local student ends up not knowing that the skills he or she acquires could be of benefit to other cultures. Hence, a potential start-up or innovative solution for solving global problems would not materialize. Hence, there is a lot of knowledge uncaptured or lost when the lack of intercultural competence burns the bridge that would have enabled knowledge flow.

Being unable to operate in multi-cultural organizations and society. The lack of intercultural competence has a broader consequence outside the classroom. Both foreign and local students who lack intercultural competences find it difficult to operate in global multicultural corporations. This is because studies indicate the lack of intercultural competence in staff working in multicultural teams, within multicultural organizations, has an effect on the performance of their duties (Matveev & Milter, 2004). As a result, international cooperations are spending money in tooling their staff with intercultural competence needed to solve global challenges. This would not be the case if students in multicultural classrooms developed their level of intercultural competences when they were in school. Based on these positive (listed earlier) and negative outcomes, it is evident that the intercultural competence of teachers and students is important.

The Importance the Neighbournliness for Teachers and Students in Multicultural Classrooms

Foreign and local teachers and students that possess neighbourliness are friendly, welcoming, cooperative, and helpful to others. They do so without intruding into the privacy of others (Di Mauro & Bolzani, 2020). Neighbourliness is not problematic for persons who possess extraversion and agreeableness as personality traits. However, for persons who do not possess these traits, being neighbourly could be problematic.

Being neighbourly is not being intrusive. However, persons that are neighbourly can be viewed by introverts as being intrusive (Bridge, Forrest, & Holland, 2004). However, teaching and learning activities are collaborative in nature. The teacher needs students that pay attention in order to teach. The students need the teacher and each other to gain insights into topics and issues they do not understand in the course of the class. However, in order for the students to learn from the teacher and themselves, they need to possess neighbourliness competences. In order for the teacher to provide support to the student during the teaching process, the teacher also needs to possess neighbourliness competences. Else, there will be frustrations experienced by both the teacher and the student. It means the teacher has to care, be empathetic, kind, considerate and resourceful in helping the student, based on the understanding of the students' cultural background.

In a multicultural classroom where neighbourliness is lacking, some students that need clarity from teachers on the topic being taught may not feel free to do so. It will also result in clustering, as students will seek neighbourliness from other students with whom they can inter-relate. In some cases, the explanation they may hold onto may be wrong, but they would not know. Finally, the students themselves, both foreign and local, will have no clue on how to develop their neighbourliness competences.

The presence of the three neighbourness competences namely, intercultural competence, Global citizenship and neighbourliness is advantageous to multicultural classrooms. It creates a class atmosphere where students from different cultures can exchange knowledge as well as learn how to collaborate on activities in multicultural settings. The absence of these competences in a multicultural classroom creates an atmosphere of untapped knowledge, ethnocentric clustering and students that cannot collaborate with persons outside their culture.

Having made an argument about the importance of neighbourness competencies in multicultural classrooms, what problems point to the lack of neighbourness competences in a multicultural classroom. These problems are outlined next.

The take away for these studies is that the increase in multicultural classrooms calls for the need to develop the neighbourness and Intercultural competences of both local and foreign students within such classrooms. The possession of these competences by students will enable them operate in multi-cultural organizations and society. Some students do develop these competences by themselves either out of necessity, interest or because of their personality. However, there are students that will need assistance in the development and utilization of their neighbourness and Intercultural competences. Such student needs the teacher as a coach to help the student in harnessing these competences as the student engage curricular activities. Hence, in the WeLearn project, the toolkit is developed as a guide for the teacher. WeLearn is a project that aims to find ways to support teachers and students in higher education to support neighbourness in their multicultural learning environments. We study neighbourness practices and create instructions for educators and students on how to embrace those practices to make the learning environments, digital and physical, better for all. The project receives funding from the Erasmus+ program. The aims of the WeLearn project are:

- Raise awareness of the importance of intercultural and neighbourness skills in a global world
- Build a framework for neighbourness skills
- Develop an online and offline toolkit for teachers
- Test the toolkits in different pedagogical environments
- Disseminate the toolkits via multiplier events

The purpose of this study is to provide an overview into the relevance of neighbourness in a multicultural classroom and challenges in a classroom that denotes the absence of neighbourness.

Method

This study provides an overview into the relevance of Neighbourness in a multicultural classroom and challenges in a classroom that denotes the absence of Neighbourness. The challenges are inspired and extracted from one-on-one Interviews with Higher Education Institution (HEI) teachers and foreign students from Finland, Italy, Denmark, Germany, Latvia and Turkey. Twenty people were interviewed. The number of teachers and students interviewed were 10 each. The number of teachers and students interviewed per country is presented in table 1 below.

In these interviews, some of them narrated the cultural challenges they encountered within the classroom. The challenges identified in these interviews are narrated in this second section of this chapter. In the first section, the relevance of neighbourness is discussed.

A structured interview was conducted with HEI teachers and foreign students from Finland, Italy, Denmark, Germany, Latvia and Turkey. Structured interview is generally conducted for the specific purpose of getting certain information from the subjects.

The interview focused on neighbourness in a multicultural classroom and challenges in a classroom that denotes the absence of neighbourness.

A purposive sample of students was selected from one of WeLearn project members who has teaching responsibilities, a teacher not involved in WeLearn who has international teaching student groups, a native student involved in international courses (with more than two years' experience of studying in your institution), an exchange student/first year degree student from abroad (to get a fresh perspective). Participants shared their availability for interviews as part of the background questionnaire.

Teachers and students participated in the partner universities. Interviews transcribed in English, and analyzed with Atlas TI. Content analysis and categorization based on the interview questions and previous neighbourness skills review

Table 1. The Number of Teachers and Students Interviewed

	Number of Teachers	Number of students
Denmark	2	2
Italy	2	2
Germany	2	2
Latvia	3	3
Finland	1	1
Turkey	2	2

Results

Based on the interview data analyzed two finding themes were identified. Finding themes:

Strenghts

- ▪ Engaging and interactive teaching
- ▪ Learning from others with different cultural backgrounds
- ▪ Teachers with a global mindset show example to students
- ▪ Strong and strengthening language skills
- ▪ Use of technology to support (distance) learning

Challenges

- ▪ Supporting student's orientation to the ways of learning and working in the study program
- ▪ Developing the required neighbourness skills and awareness of them along studies
- ▪ Getting the international students to mix with the locals

Students and Their Tackgrounds

- • The students come from a large range of countries.
- • The international degree programs attract students from other parts of the world as well: Middle- and Far-east and African countries, some students come from the Americas as well.
- • Students' motivation is building elements for the future career.
- • The most common motivation for international study was mentioned as an opportunity to experience something new and learn new ideas.
- • The quality of education in the host country.
- • The adventure of learning new things.
- • For many students, international study is also a time of personal growth away from friends and family

Teachers and Their Backgrounds

- • The interviewed teachers most have a mix of approximately 70%/30% local and international students.
- • The teachers interviewed for the study were a mix of locals with some internationalization experience.
- • Some of the teachers have received intercultural pedagogical training, but not all of them.
- • In the Nordic countries problem-based teaching is common on international courses, in other universities the studies can focus on larger projects, or the interaction happens in a more traditional classroom setting.

A global Mindset and Global Citizens

- The interviewees describe an intercultural and global mindset as the openness to different cultures and willingness to understand others.
- Openness and curiosity are often mentioned as characteristics of a global mindset.
- In addition to being open, global mindset is the readiness to take action, whether it is to help others, communicate with them effectively, or adjust ones own actions to better suit the expectations of others.
- The interviewees agree on that international academic programs should focus on developing the global mindset of their students, and thus educate future global citizens.

Language: Barrier or Not

- The interviewees feel that language is not a barrier for learning, and it does not usually form a barrier for communication between teachers and students.
- The language skills of even new international students are usually sufficient to follow teaching and understand instructions.
- For some students communicating with other students from all over the world and with various different accents does take some time to adjust to.
- Understanding others requires understanding the words they use, but also understanding body-language and idioms, which differ greatly between cultures.
- The universities do not seem to encourage the local student societies to include the international students much in their free time activities in order to promote integration.

Overcoming Differences

Different working habits and backgrounds form challenges for working in intercultural groups. This is both a challenge and a benefit: exposing oneself for different cultures increases tolerance and understanding. Students tell that figuring out this challenge takes extra energy, but is rewarding in the end. It makes starting in an international study program difficult, and some students may need extra support to recognize the sources of the challenges, and the identity building process that takes place during international study.

Students notice challenges in different study styles, different assumptions about group work, different ambition levels of students, different background in theoretical knowledge, different pace of communication, different ways of identifying and solving conflicts. In addition to the communication, being open to others and understanding them is essential. For this skill to develop, some kind of international exposure is essential. One is unable to understand culture shock without experiencing it, and thus being able to help others overcome it. Gaining international experience and helping others with them are aspects of successful life in international settings.

A Good International Teacher

The interviewees list a key characteristic of a good international teacher as being able to understand well people from different cultures, and being able to help the students understand each other. A good international teacher both has a global mindset, and helps students to build one for themselves.

Other characteristics of a good international teacher are not really specific to the interculturality, although some interviewees list knowing characteristics of different cultures as a trait for one. Many of the traits the interviewees list can characterize a good teacher in general: being able to make students understand the topic, explain the content from multiple viewpoints, engage people in discussions, motivate the students to learn and work hard.

Many interviewees mentioned that to be able to understand the cultures of others, one must understand their own culture. The teachers need to be able to guide the students in their journey of learning not only of other culture, but also their own culture.

Skills of a Global Citizen: Neighbourness Skills

- Taking the global mindset into individual skills.
- Understanding and curiosity of others.
- Having strong communication skills
- Being open to others and understanding them is essential.
- International exposure is essential. One is unable to understand culture shock without experiencing it.
- Gaining international experience and helping others with them are aspects of successful life in international settings.

Overview on Neighbourness in the Classroom

In a classroom, there are two main types of interactions. The first type of interaction is the teacher-student interaction. The second type of interaction is the student-student interactions. In a multicultural classroom setting, these interactions could occur in different ways namely:

- The interactions between foreign students with either local students or local teachers. An example could be a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Denmark where the teacher is Danish and the student composition is a mix of Danish and foreign students.
- The interactions between a local student and either foreign students or foreign teachers. An example could be an HEI in Germany where the teacher was raised in Turkey and the student composition is a mix of German and foreign students.
- The interactions between a foreign teacher and local students. An example could be an HEI in Turkey

where the teacher is from Latvia and all the students in the class are Turkish.

- The interactions between a local teacher and foreign students. An example of this could be an elective class in HEI in Italy where the students taking the elective course are all foreigners and the teacher is Italian.

In these examples, the teacher provides instructions and receives simultaneous feedback to both foreign and local students. The students (both local and foreign) interact between themselves. The interaction could be during lectures, group works, group assignments etc. Effective verbal and non-verbal interaction between the teacher and the student groups will occur if the teacher (either foreign or local) and students (both foreign and local) possess neighbourness competences. Implying that they possess global citizenship, intercultural competence and neighbourliness competences.

The absence of these competencies for the students could result in ethnic or cultural clustering between the students. In the case of the teacher, the absence of these competences could result in the unclear communication of instruction, misunderstanding of the students' academic needs and apathy towards the student. This would be the case if the teacher is either foreign and teaching local students or local but has a mix of foreign and local students. In the case of the latter, the teacher may end up paying more attention to the local student due to cultural similarity resulting in the ease of being neighbourly. Hence, the development of neighbourness competences in teachers and students is important. It will result in effective interaction during the teaching and learning sessions in the classroom. Furthermore, it will enable the students both local and foreign to collaborate as well as learn from the teacher and one another. It will also enable the teacher to learn from the students as well to either support his or her research activities.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to provide an overview into the relevance of neighbourness in a multicultural classroom and challenges in a classroom that denotes the absence of neighbourness. The challenges are inspired and extracted from one-on-one Interviews with HEI teachers and foreign students from Finland, Italy, Denmark, Germany, Latvia and Turkey. Twenty people were interviewed. In the multicultural classrooms, six different challenges were identified as a result of analyzing the interview data. Those are language barriers, misunderstanding of cultural dispositions towards others, asymmetric communication, differences in cultural behavioral norms governing interactions, different styles of learning and problem with the familiarization with technology. Teachers have a big role in engaging students in interactions. Especially getting international and local students to mix seems to require teachers' intervention international teachers need to be good teachers, with good intercultural and neighbourness skills. Students need support. Both, at the beginning and at the end of an international education experience. Thus, to be able to develop their neighbourness skills and to be aware of their international experience impact. It is believed that WeLearn project outcomes give the teacher insight into some of the challenges from the point of views of teachers and students in higher education context.

Acknowledgements

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