

LAIC Special Issue

Intercultural dialogue: Current challenges; future directions

Editors: Prue Holmes, John O'Regan, & Melinda Dooley

(Please note that the main papers were edited by Prue Holmes and John O'Regan, and the Pedagogic Forum papers were edited by Melinda Dooley.)

Introduction

Prue Holmes¹

This special issue showcases papers presented at the International Association of Languages and Intercultural Communication (IALIC) conference in Durham in December 2012. The conference, similarly entitled “Intercultural dialogue: Current challenges; future directions”, invited presenters to critically examine the concept of intercultural dialogue and its implications for researching and learning about intercultural communication in the increasingly intercultural communities in which people now live.

The term “intercultural dialogue” is now in wide currency and offers much hope to peace and harmony among nations. Officially inaugurated in 2008, via the Council of Europe’s White Paper and promulgated by the European Union’s declaration, in the same year, as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, the concept suggests a social and political response to the need for intercultural communication and understanding in what was then a rapidly expanding European Union. (Currently, there are 28 nations encompassing a mix of languages, ethnicities, religions, histories, geographical complexities, etc., including emergent transcultural landscapes brought about by migration and other global flows of people). The term engenders a rational post-war European society where people can engage in (inter)cultural communication openly and freely in conditions of security and mutual respect, thanks to the numerous institutions within the European Union, and the laws and conventions that require and condone civil communicative practices. As Phipps points out (in her paper in this collection), intercultural dialogue is cast in terms of inter-nation understanding, cooperation, conciliation, and mutual respect.

Other organisations, e.g., UNESCO, the British Council, have also developed their own definitions (see Phipps’ paper in this issue for their description and critique) and institutional structures associated with the term. The aims and activities of these institutions within the European Union seek to advance peace, reconciliation and democracy through the principles of intercultural dialogue, earning the European Union (as Phipps points out) the Nobel Peace Prize for 2012.

¹ p.m.holmes@durham.ac.uk

The concept has been taken up outside of Europe, too, through the National Communication Association's Summer Conference on Intercultural Dialogue in 2009 at Maltepe University, Istanbul, Turkey, resulting in the establishment of the Center for Intercultural Dialogue (<http://centerforinterculturaldialogue.org/>) by Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz and supported by the Council of Communication Associations in the USA. And there are many other institutions, too numerous to mention here, in support of the cause of intercultural dialogue, and much associated research activity.

However, the term, its accompanying rhetoric, and the institutions that have emerged in its name, belie the intercultural communicative undercurrents and their manifestations people encounter in their daily lives. Within context of the European Union, Näss (2010) noted that policy documents were both ambiguous and indistinct in their understanding of the term both as a concept to guide policy construction and as a political instrument to manage cultural diversity and variation. Most noticeably, the absence of dialogue is apparent where the Roma in Europe are concerned. Herakova (2009) argues that the Roma people's "inarticulateness and nondominant worldview (because of difference experiences) prevent them from participation in the public sphere" (p. 294); they are a socially excluded group, muted by the voices of the majority. Similarly, Witteborne (2011) illustrated the limits of intercultural dialogue on the internet, e.g., as Uighur calls for democracy in Xinjiang on a multilingual Uighur pro-independence website were subverted and reinterpreted by Chinese nationalist voices. And Anoush Ehteshami (School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University), in his opening address of the Durham conference, reminded us that the concept is full of optimism in a world where challenges for resources, power, and ownership are often accompanied by an unwillingness to relinquish them; the result is intractable conflict. In such contexts, the aims of intercultural dialogue are unrecognisable and meaningless.

Yet many intercultural communication scholars remind us that conflict is a normal and evolving state in building intercultural alliances and relationships (e.g., Collier, 2003; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2006). What then is the scope—and hope—for intercultural dialogue? Indeed, intercultural communicative processes are essentially dialogic, and involve recognising and negotiating points of sameness as well as difference. Yet, it is often at the points of difference—the scope of dialogue—where communicators focus on the linguistic, political, religious, historical, economic, etc., positioning and identities of each communicator. Through dialogue individuals have the possibility to (re)negotiate and (re)construct their positions and identities within and across groups (Collier, 2003), to acknowledge the complexity and diversity of relationships, and to work towards solutions to seemingly intractable divergences and unrelenting postures in situations of conflict. This is the hope of intercultural dialogue.

The Special Issue papers

The authors of the papers in this special issue offer new and fresh ways of theorising and researching intercultural dialogue—its potential for development, and its limits and

qualifications. They do this through their critical examination of the concept, its meaning in practice, and its implications for intercultural communication, intercultural education, language teaching, and improving people's lives.

The special issue leads with Ferri's theoretical analysis of Levinas's understanding of the nature of language which she draws on to illustrate the limitations of current conceptualisations of intercultural communication competence and responsibility. In her analysis Ferri highlights the importance of the interdependence of Self and Other, the role of power, and an awareness of the position of the self as a potential all-knowing subject capable of silencing others. She concludes that an "ethical approach to IC [intercultural communication] entails taking the risk of meeting the other qua other, without the safety net of cultural categorisation, and at the same time being aware that the encounter with the other does not occur in a vacuum, because we are always positioned within networks of power".

Dacheva and Fay's study of Bulgarian Ladino speakers' narratives reminds us that intercultural dialogue is not a new phenomenon. Drawing on Brunner's narrative construction of reality and theories of interculturality, they reveal, through (re)storied narratives, the highly situated complexities of language-based identity performances of Ladino speakers in Bulgaria. Their analysis uncovers five zones of interculturality (intrapersonal, domestic, local, diasporic, international) as a framework for appreciating and exploring how languages, cultures, affiliations, identities are in constant interaction with one another.

Handford's paper draws on a corpus-informed discourse analysis of the indexical *we* to show how speakers signal different identities at different moments in the unfolding discourse in international, inter-organisational meetings. Handford concludes that the ubiquitous use of *we*—as a cultural as well as statistical keyword—"constitutes the collaborative tenor of much professional discourse". However, he suggests that further research is required to understand how cultural as well as organisation identities are indexed beyond this specific use of *we*.

Gao Yihong explores how intercultural dialogue is played out in Chinese youths' linguistic identities through their learning of English. Through an historical examination of approaches to second language acquisition and learning, she outlines four key prototypes—faithful imitator, legitimate speaker, playful creator and dialogical communicator—of the English language learner. The fourth, the dialogical communicator, is the contemporary language learner prototype which emerges through an "'internal conversation' between structure and agency, society and individual, other and self". Gao argues that the dialogical communicator prototype relies on "sustained personal commitment and gradual maturation in a nurtured environment", and "does not lend itself easily to programmed training or testing", which therefore has implications for targeting intercultural competence and intercultural citizenship in language education.

The fifth paper, by Riitaoja and Dervin, shifts the focus to an ethnographic study of interreligious dialogue in two Finnish schools. Drawing on postcolonial, poststructural and related feminist theories, they examine constructions of Self and Other in the everyday encounters among teachers and students, and the resultant otherising of individuals and the religious groups to which they belong. Thus, they question whether the aims of interreligious dialogue in schools are “a viable way to learn about each other and to increase mutual understanding”.

Crosbie takes up Ferri’s critique of intercultural competence theory and the need for an ethical approach to intercultural dialogue by drawing on Nussbaum’s capabilities approach in democratic citizenship education and Sen’s idea of individuals’ freedom in reasoning and decision making. Crosbie highlights the limitations of ‘skills’ or ‘competence’ based approaches in that they “focus on the results or ends that an individual can achieve”. By contrast, the capabilities approach emphasises “the freedom and agency that an individual has to be and to act”, requiring people to make ethically informed choices. Crosbie’s paper provides a pedagogic direction for building capability in language learners, by foregrounding social justice and agency through a content and language integrated learning approach (CLIL) in the language classroom.

The final paper by Phipps completes the dis-ease, initiated by Ferri and developed further by the authors of the other papers, over the robustness of “intercultural dialogue” to achieve its aims. Phipps questions the idealised meanings of intercultural dialogue, as promulgated by European organisations such as UNESCO, the British Council, and the Council of Europe. Through an ethnographic study of peace work in Gaza, she argues that “concepts which have arisen in contexts of relative peace and stability in Europe are not suited to conditions of conflict and siege”. She concludes that the concept “is at best problematic and largely inoperable under present conditions of globalization” where there is “conflict, vulnerability, insecurity and aggression”. Instead, she argues, models that are designed for “depoliticised and normatively conservative conditions” need to be replaced by “models of creative practice and transformation”.

Thus, the different theoretical perspectives and analyses presented by the authors in these seven papers are a reminder that researchers in the field of intercultural communication require theories and methods that are both robust and appropriate for the complex contexts and conditions in which they are researching. Together, the papers illustrate and exemplify the need for theoretical and methodological complexity and nuance when researching people who are communicating where there are different languages and identities at play, and the need for intercultural communication researchers to be ever mindful of context and power in intercultural dialogue—who speaks for whom, when, how, and under what circumstances and conditions.

The Pedagogic Forum papers

The three papers in the Pedagogic Forum provide international scenarios—in China, Singapore, and Portugal—where intercultural dialogue is operationalised through intercultural pedagogies. Wang highlights how the emergence of General Education programmes in China offer the potential to develop students’ intercultural communication and competence. The courses within these general education programmes, e.g., in a news listening class in an English course, enable students to develop interdisciplinary knowledge alongside intercultural perspectives and competence, seen as necessary for communication with others in an intercultural world. A corollary is that teachers, too, need to develop intercultural competence.

In the second paper, Jaidev deals with preparing international and local students in Singapore for managing intercultural dialogic encounters in increasingly globalised workplaces. Jaidev discusses how students used reflective blog posts on their own as well as their peers’ intercultural interactions in group learning tasks and assignments. She argues that blogs create “a non-threatening, low stress environment” where students can openly and freely discuss and learn about intercultural communication with cultural others, in order to prepare for similar scenarios they are likely to encounter in the workplace.

Finally, Santos, Araújo e Sá and Simões, drawing on a larger collaborative project in Aveiro, Portugal, present a model for intercultural education, developed within a partnership involving two primary schools (largely monocultural), an immigrants’ association, a cultural association, an institution working with disabled people, the City Hall and Library belonging to the City Hall. The model consisted of several practical activities, integrating the various partners, and thus facilitating opportunities for intercultural dialogue and the development of intercultural awareness and competence. Santos and her team report that participants demonstrated increased knowledge of different countries and cultures, and developed their critical thinking and attitudes such as increased curiosity and awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity, respect for the others and working in partnership.

An afterword...

Robi Damelin, an Israeli mother, and Basswam Aramin, a Palestinian father, are two parents who each lost a child in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They each interpret their understanding of that loss on the BBC’s Radio 4 *Today* programme (7th November, 2013), and how they seek a solution to the killing—through dialogue. Robi interprets the killing of her son, serving in the Reserves, by a Palestinian sniper:

I’m sure the Palestinian did not kill him because he was David; he killed him because he was a symbol of an occupying army. That’s not an easy thing to say.

Basswam interprets the killing of his 10-year old daughter by an Israeli soldier with a rubber bullet, from a distance of 15-20 metres, outside her school:

I didn't find the answer in revenge because for more than 100 years we have been killing each other, and the result will bring to ourselves more blood, and more victims, more pain.

Neither seeks revenge, but instead, dialogue. As members of the Parents' Circle, they believe that through dialogue with others, and by engaging with political figures, it is possible to stop the killing and influence the peace process. Robi states:

We are not about rainbows and flowers and bad poetry. We are talking about really understanding the other, and we're talking about creating a framework for a reconciliation process to be an integral part of any future peace agreement.

Despite the anger and pain they feel, and the inhumanity of the other, they do not want retaliation and revenge, but dialogue with others to seek understanding, build trust, come to know the other—not as the enemy, but as a human being who wants security and peace. Bassram concludes “our role is to convince others that peace is possible...it starts with individuals”. Their dialogic intentions and actions embody the hope of dialogue.

Together, the papers in this special issue illustrate the scope and hope of intercultural dialogue. They offer a new theoretical, methodological, and pedagogic agenda for building on, and perhaps even transforming, the concept of intercultural dialogue. They open up new lines of inquiry which invite further theorising of intercultural dialogic communication and its related concepts of interculturality, capability, responsibility, ethics, interreligious dialogue, and conflict transformation. They also highlight the importance of educational programmes and pedagogic methods that provide foundations of intercultural understanding among students, young people, and the wider community.

Biographical note

Prue Holmes researches and teaches across a range of areas in intercultural education and intercultural communication in the School of Education, Durham University. She hosted the IALIC (2012) conference at Durham University where these papers were first presented, and she is the Chairperson of IALIC.

References

- Collier, M.-J. (2003). Negotiating intercultural alliance relationships: Toward transformation. In M.-J. Collier (Ed.), *Intercultural alliances: Critical transformation* (pp. 1-16). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Herakova, L.L. (2009). Identity, communication, inclusion: The Roma and (new) Europe. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 2, 279-297.

Näss, H.E. (2010). The ambiguities of intercultural dialogue: Critical perspectives on the European Union's new agenda for culture. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 23. Retrieved from <http://immi.se/intercultural/>

Oetzel, J., & Ting-Toomey, S. (2006). *The Sage handbook of conflict communication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Witteborne, S. (2011). Discursive grouping in a virtual forum: Dialogue, difference, and the "intercultural". *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 4, 109-126.