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Ethical Challenges in Intercultural Citizenship Education with 'Difficult Topics' in the World Language Classroom and Beyond

Melina Porto [1], Irina Golubeva [2,*] and Michael Byram [3]

[1] National Research Council, Universidad Nacional de La Plata and Conicet, La Plata 1900, Argentina; melinaporto@conicet.gov.ar
[2] College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, University of Maryland Baltimore County, 1000 Hilltop Circle, Baltimore, MD 21250, USA
[3] Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology, Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski, 1504 Sofia, Bulgaria; m.s.byram@dur.ac.uk
* Correspondence: golubeva@umbc.edu

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to examine the ethical challenges that arise in the world language classroom and beyond from using intercultural citizenship pedagogy. Intercultural citizenship is, in general, seen as a recent and positive development in intercultural language education for helping students engage with topics of social significance in the classroom. However, there are ethical challenges involved, for instance, related to the political or sensitive nature of such topics. We define and illustrate some of these ethical concerns and their implications for education by drawing on an intercultural citizenship project about COVID-19 carried out in two higher education contexts in 2020. The analysis of this example shows that these ethical concerns are unavoidable but can be minimised with an action research perspective and a combination of pedagogies of intercultural citizenship, discomfort, and the arts. We conclude with a discussion of the transferability of the example and its consequences for any language and intercultural communication teaching which deals with controversial and sensitive matters.

Keywords: intercultural citizenship; COVID-19; difficult topics; teacher roles; ethics

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1. Introduction

This article aims to make a contribution to current discussions related to ethical dilemmas and concerns in language education (Byram 2022; Byram et al. 2021). Of particular interest is the focus upon 'pedagogies of pain' (Ennser–Kananen 2016; Osborn 2016; Wesely et al. 2016) and 'pedagogies of discomfort' (Zembylas 2015) in world language education, because these pedagogies draw attention to the importance of the ethical aspects of addressing sensitive issues in the classroom—issues which involve students in noticing pain (their own or others'), expressing it in linguistic, artistic, or bodily ways, and taking action to respond to such pain productively. In this article, we develop this work further by analysing two related ethical issues arising from intercultural citizenship theory and pedagogy, namely, teacher roles and sensitive topics. We do so by drawing on a previously published project about COVID-19 carried out in 2020 in our universities located in Argentina and the USA (Porto et al. 2023). That project—described in more detail below—brought together, through the internet, university students in Argentina and the USA to analyse the COVID phenomenon as they were experiencing it at the time, to use linguistic and artistic modes of response, to share their responses, and to become actively involved in their local society to help others during the pandemic.

In our previous publication, we did not have space in which to address the ethical issues and here focus exclusively on them, formulating our concerns as two questions: What ethical dilemmas arise from using intercultural citizenship theory and pedagogy in the world language classroom? How can such dilemmas be addressed pedagogically? We answer these questions by reflecting on what we did at the time of the COVID-19 project and by conducting a retrospective analysis.

2. Intercultural Citizenship Education

It is scarcely necessary to rehearse the now commonplace observations about globalisation and its general impact. The impact on world/foreign language education is also evident in discussions of its instrumental value. A striking example of this is the recent argument in Denmark that English should no longer be taught as a 'foreign' language but as a 'parallel' language to Danish since it is omnipresent in Danish society as well as in the wider world (Lønsmann et al. 2024). On the other hand, the concept of intercultural citizenship education, which is in part a response to the globalisation phenomenon, is much less widely understood.

Intercultural citizenship theory and pedagogy, while acknowledging that intercultural and world/foreign language education has varied aims in different contexts supported by a range of educational philosophies, are based in a humanistic philosophy. Humanistic goals are pursued to complement the performativity, accountability, and instrumental aims characterising other philosophies. 'Humanistic' here means that students' backgrounds, experiences, aspirations and worldviews are acknowledged, valued, and welcomed (Block and Gray 2016; Leung and Scarino 2016) and that their personal and civic development occurs through their civic and social activity in a broader community, outside the classroom. Intercultural citizenship education in schools and universities therefore encourages students to engage actively with the world in order to improve it (for practical examples see, e.g., Golubeva 2025a, 2025b). It is socially committed to the society in which it is embedded (Byram 2008; Byram et al. 2017). Intercultural citizenship thus combines the widely accepted communicative aims of language teaching with intercultural and citizenship goals grounded in this humanistic philosophy. It also emphasises the acquisition by learners of criticality (Barnett 1997; Johnston et al. 2011), for instance, through critical language awareness (Fairclough 1992) and critical cultural awareness (Byram 2012), and, second, the significance of taking a transnational perspective—created by working with students from another country—on the needs of the local community.

While in its beginnings in the late 2000s and early 2010s, the theory was considered innovative (Byram 2008), and concerns were mostly about how to put the theory in practice pedagogically (see Byram et al. 2017). In recent years, teachers have experienced more profound concerns arising from ethical issues and dilemmas (Byram 2022; Byram et al. 2021). These concerns are varied and involve, for instance, considerations about conflicting expectations from teachers, institutions, students and parents, and dilemmas with regulatory frameworks and governmental and/or institutional educational policies, among others. Furthermore, Porto and Byram (2022) have addressed the political implications as they report on the reactionary response to intercultural citizenship in a university setting in the Global South, and Byram et al. (2021) have focused upon the underlying understanding of transformative learning, learners' informed consent, and teacher positionality.

We now introduce some ethical issues connected with our two topics: teacher roles and the inclusion of controversial or sensitive topics in the classroom, drawing on the literature from education and history. We then use our COVID-19 project to illustrate these ethical concerns. We conclude with implications for teaching language and intercultural communication combined with intercultural citizenship.

3. Intercultural Citizenship and Its Ethical Considerations

3.1. Teacher Roles

Teachers of intercultural citizenship encourage or require their learners to observe some problematic aspect of the world in which they live, to take a decentred perspective on what they observe—often with the help of learners from another country—to analyse it critically, and to formulate and activate improvements. Because intercultural citizenship pre-supposes a culture of democracy in which learners can critique and improve social issues, the teacher also fosters democratic values and competences. This means that intercultural citizenship pedagogy presupposes new teacher roles and a new teacher professional identity that extend beyond knowledge transmission and the development of linguistic, communicative, and intercultural competences. These roles and identity bring with them concerns about educational philosophy, about what a 'good' education involves and how it should be realised. Biesta (2024) for instance states that such education should go beyond instrumentalisation, encouraging students to be inquisitive about themselves and about the world. Johnston et al. (2011), following Barnett (1997), argue that, through higher education, learners should become 'critical beings' engaged in society.

The underlying educational question behind intercultural citizenship is, therefore, how educators can work with their learners, their families, and their communities to address everyday challenges and problems and envision new, hopeful futures. Intercultural citizenship encourages students to demonstrate willingness and ability to engage in dialogue with others; allows others to express their viewpoints; avoids hostility and confrontation; resolves conflict peacefully; develops values such as respect, mutual understanding, social awareness, and openness; and transfers knowledge to others by engaging in civic participation locally.

This potential new role and identity may, however, put them in conflict with people around them. For, if teachers and teacher educators pursue the purposes and philosophy of intercultural citizenship and turn away from a wholly instrumental view of language teaching—often formulated as creating a linguistically skilled workforce for a globalised economy—their views may conflict with those dominant in many education systems influenced by neo-liberal perspectives on the relationship between education and society. If they are as a consequence not supported by their institutional and broader contexts (institutional statutes, laws governing education, policy and curricular documents), they might suffer discrimination, their teaching approaches might be censored, and their jobs put at risk (Porto and Byram 2022). Teachers and teacher educators may consequently feel exposed and experience a tension known as 'emotion labour' (Benesch 2020). This is our first ethical dilemma related to teacher roles and identity: should teachers take on these new roles and philosophies and the risks which accompany them?

Such issues are seldom treated in teacher education, and there are implications here for further discussion on other occasions of whether and how teacher education should draw on other disciplines and not just applied linguistics and developmental psychology.

3.2. Difficult Topics

Our second dilemma concerns the content of intercultural citizenship in world language teaching, where students are encouraged not only to work on issues in the classroom but also, and crucially, to go out into the communities in which they live and take action. Here, we draw on the concept of 'difficult or troubled knowledge' (Britzman 1998) defined as the "profound feelings of loss, shame, resentment, or defeat that one carries from his or her participation in a traumatized community" (Zembylas 2013a, p. 177). Difficult themes are those associated with social and historical traumas (racism, apartheid, genocide, dictatorships, human rights abuse) typically addressed in history, social studies, and

civics/citizenship classrooms. But how is trauma defined? We follow Lawson et al. (2019), who state that, while there exist several operational definitions of the concept and there is consensus that "trauma threatens and hampers well-being" (p. 424), they adopt the definition provided by the United States Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2018): trauma results from an event or a set of circumstances experienced by an individual as harmful (physically or emotionally), even life threatening, with lasting, adverse effects on an individual's mental, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being. The topic of our project was COVID-19, which fits this definition of trauma.

Our second ethical dilemma revolves around whether this was a suitable topic for our teaching whilst the pandemic was raging. In this regard, we identified three major concerns:

Our first question was what kind of difficult topic it was, whether, for example, the pandemic could be compared with traumas arising in contexts of war, dictatorship, genocide, and the like, where there are victims and victimisers, and victims are subjected to wrongdoings that are "dehumanizing evil" (Wolfendale 2005, p. 345). In such cases, there are primary victims (the disappeared, the tortured, the dead), secondary victims (their families, friends, and acquaintances) and tertiary victims with no first-hand experience of that trauma but who nonetheless suffer a "collective loss" as a group that is "extended to community and society" (Govier and Verwoerd 2002, p. 103). In the case of COVID-19, no clear-cut positions existed at the time.

The ethical dilemma for us was therefore whether it was appropriate to introduce this topic at all. We examined the challenges and risks discussed in history education which could be related to our project since there was little or no discussion of the teaching of controversial or difficult topics in language and communication courses at that time. On this basis, we identified a second concern, related to the issues of instrumentalisation and representation. Discussing the possibility of building historical knowledge by acquaintance and the choice of topics for teaching and learning, Maxwell (2008, p. 78) states that "[O]ne obvious objection is that certain historical events, while perhaps morally horrible enough, are simply too controversial to be considered a responsible choice". There is a danger that suffering and death are instrumentalised in order to develop students' historical knowledge (Brown 2021). Parkins (2014) questions the prioritisation of students' educational and citizenship needs over others' suffering and death, and Maxwell (2008) questions the justification that the educational value of learning from history's difficult knowledge can only be achieved through such content. He warns that this instrumentalisation is highly problematic, if not even offensive. Furthermore, according to McLean (2023), instrumentalisation also leads to other ethical issues such as the appropriation and consumption of others' suffering; the arousal of self-indulgence, empty empathy, or sentimentality in connection with that suffering; and the possibility of re-traumatisation through vicarious trauma, i.e., severe strain resulting from either engaging empathetically with others' traumas, or from re-living one's own traumatic experiences through somebody else's trauma. In the classroom, these questions also lead to the problem of representation or misrepresentation of the historical or traumatic event. Critical analyses of representation are needed in each case, motivated by the following questions: Who chooses this content on what basis? What kinds of discourses, suffering and traumas are students confronted with? Whose? Which ones are silenced? (Parkins 2014; see also Keenan 2021).

A third potential concern is related to Brabeck et al.'s (1994) argument that a massive encounter with suffering might be disturbing in unhealthy ways. However, Maxwell (2008) reviews the relevant literature that points to the conclusion that this concern is unfounded: adolescents and young adults can in fact understand evil acts, do not generally find the content traumatising, and do not feel their sense of well-being is threatened. The explanation lies in the means that they use to grapple with difficult themes: they "semantically link

the choices and dispositions of the perpetrators, the bystanders and the victims to what they see as comparable events and individuals in their own day-to-day moral experience" (Maxwell 2008, p. 79). If this is accepted, then it is also possible to accept Chinnery's (2013) suggestion that controversial issues should be seen not as objects to learn about or from, but rather as themes that make "moral demands on us here and now [and that] call[s] us to 'live historically'—to live in a particular kind of ethical relationship with the past" (p. 254).

In short, in the face of the potential instrumentalisation of suffering, a significant question is how teachers decide if they are exposing students to unnecessary harm or helping them to face moral demands in the here and now.

To illustrate the significance of these ethical concerns, we now consider, in retrospect, whether making the traumatic pandemic as a topic and the means to introduce the aims of intercultural citizenship education was an appropriate thing to do.

4. A Project on COVID-19

The project was a virtual exchange designed as a COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) experience. It involved Argentinian and US-based undergraduates who explored the COVID-19 theme at the onset of the pandemic in May and June 2020. M.P. and I.G. were the teachers in this project, and M.B. acted as a 'critical friend' who provided critical insights (Merriam 1998). The students in both countries had stayed for over two months under lockdown, and university teaching had gone remote. In addition to the usual aims for our language and communication courses—developing students' knowledge about intercultural communication and their linguistic and communication competences—we included aims of education for intercultural citizenship—critical understanding and taking action in society—and how this might be realised during the pandemic. Adding to this our insights from pedagogies of discomfort and the arts, the focus was also on how the students were coping with the pandemic at the time.

One teacher and her students, in Argentina, were in a world language classroom, in which they explored contemporary global issues. The second was teaching a course in the USA on intercultural communication. In both cases, the focus was on the content of the course rather than the improvement of language competences, but the teacher in the first case already had experience of how focus on content also improves language competence and was therefore meeting usual language teaching aims as well as introducing new ones (Porto 2019).

In Argentina, there were 15 second-year students, future teachers and/or translators of English at a national public university. They were 18–22 years of age and had a B2/C1 level of English according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001). In the United States, there were 10 students, aged 18–26, enrolled in various undergraduate programmes (Biological Sciences, Business Technology Administration, Health Administration and Policy, Information Systems, Media and Communication Studies, and Psychology). For a variety of reasons—some were international students, others were first-generation immigrants—English was, for most of them, their second or third language, but all had a CEFR C1/C2 level of competence, and English was used as the lingua franca between the two groups. In terms of ethnic, cultural, language and religious backgrounds, the US group was more diverse than the Argentinian group.

It is clear, therefore, that these students had high levels of competence in English, and we could be confident that engagement with difficult topics would not be compromised in any significant degree by their language skills. They were able to handle potential problems of comprehension in ways similar to students with English as their L1, for whom difficult topics might also challenge their understanding. Comparison with a control group of students with English as L1 would be interesting but beyond the practical possibilities, and

comparison with students with lower levels of L2 competence—or students of a younger age—would be in principle worthwhile but beyond our possibilities on this occasion.

Participation in the project was voluntary for the students in the Argentinian university, while, in the US institution, intercultural exchange was part of the course syllabus. The students signed informed consent and release forms. We assured anonymity (unless students explicitly asked us to share their names to give credit to their work) and the right to withdraw from this study at any time.

The data were collected through pre- and post- online surveys, students' artistic multimodal creations, written reports and statements, video-recorded interactions, online discussion forums, and self-reflections. For analysis, we applied both quantitative and qualitative methods, with a focus on textual and audio-visual material, which helped us to uncover themes, symbols, and meanings.

We developed the project in six stages as shown in Figure 1, following the stages of action research (Burns 2010) to make adjustments as needed; i.e., we began with the development of the action plan, implemented the different stages, evaluated each stage as it was taking place, reflected upon it, and re-designed specific elements on the go.

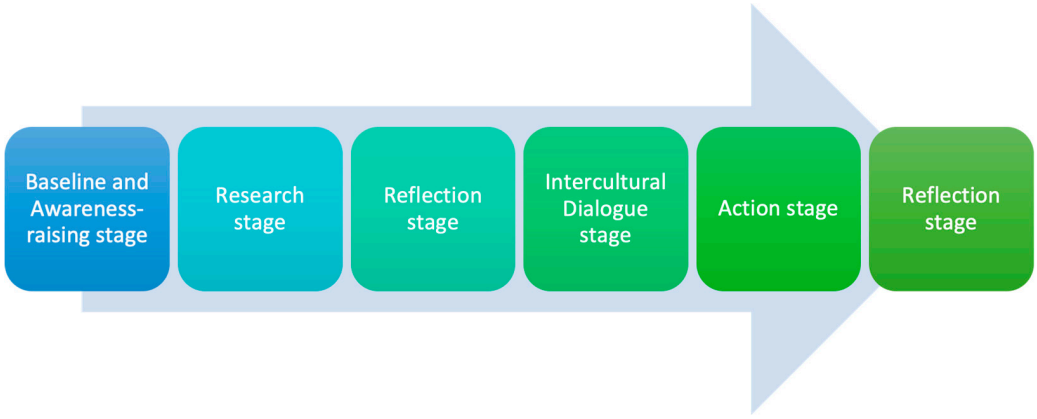

Figure 1. Project stages.

In the 'baseline and awareness-raising' stage, the students completed a pre-project questionnaire which inquired about their feelings and worries regarding the pandemic and how they thought they could cope with them at the time. For instance, one question asked them to verbalise their emotions using at least three adjectives. The purpose and effect of this was to thematise their emotional responses and to help them open up.

In the second 'research' stage, each student researched and collected examples of artistic expression related to the pandemic in their country. For instance, a US student found online a portrait of a senior high school student who expressed, by means of pencil drawing, shared emotions of sadness and disappointment among his class of 2020 because of losing their graduation experience to COVID-19 (https://www.wral.com/durham-high-school-senior-s-art-symbolizes-loss-for-the-class-of-2020/19072948—accessed 20 February 2025). An example from the Argentinian students was graffiti found both online and in the streets of their city that expressed fear and, at the same time, hope.

Then, followed, in the third stage, a first moment of reflection in which, not yet interacting with their transnational peers, the students shared with each other the examples of artistic expression related to the pandemic that they had collected, reflected upon them in small groups, and, then, each group created an artwork to represent their feelings about the current situation. One group, for instance, created a poster in which they showed all the stages that a person was going through in the pandemic. The students accompanied their artistic work with a group report, which they shared with other groups.

After that, the fourth, intercultural dialogue stage began, and mixed transnational groups of five students were formed. Each group shared what they had created in their national groups and discussed the content and associated emotions. They then collaborated on an artistic creation intended to channel their personal feelings and emotions on the one hand and make a contribution to their respective societies and the global community on the other (a citizenship goal). Examples are posters and recorded video clips accompanied by music whose main themes were solidarity, hope, and transformation. In a written statement, each group described their artefacts and their creative process. These statements complemented the meanings available from their artefacts and were targeted at anyone who came across their work.

In a fifth stage of 'action'—another citizenship goal—the students engaged with their respective communities by using their artwork. Their purpose was to raise awareness in their local community and, ultimately, in their society, about the emotional dangers of the pandemic and the importance of helping others to cope with them. For example, in addition to posting their artistic creations on their social media, the US students helped homeless people by donating clothes and food, translated, and shared medical information about the virus, distributed masks, water, and snacks to Black Lives Matter protesters, created a project blog, and so on. The Argentinian students shared the information gathered during the project on Instagram and their social networks and joined existing outreach projects at their university intended to bring relief to vulnerable local populations.

There was a sixth stage in the form of a post-project questionnaire in which the students reflected on their role in society. For a full account of data collection and analysis, see Porto et al. (2023).

5. Ethical Dilemmas: Analysis and Discussion

In this section, we present and analyse instances of ethical dilemmas from our project, related to our two themes: (a) teacher roles and (b) difficult topics. We illustrate them using classroom-based examples that reveal how we dealt with them pedagogically. For our analysis, we follow the procedures in Porto and Zembylas (2024, p. 7) based on the following questions:

1. What is the ethical dilemma at hand, and why is this important?
2. How does it emerge in practice?
3. How did the teachers deal with it? What are the benefits and problems with this pedagogical handling of the ethical dilemma at hand?

5.1. Teacher Roles

The pandemic led us to question our priorities for the classroom as language and intercultural communication teachers. We thought that we could not go on teaching our courses as usual and decided to make the pandemic the core topic for a virtual exchange project that we had begun to plan before the pandemic in March 2020, using intercultural citizenship theory as a foundation.

As the pandemic was triggering feelings of pain, anguish, and other discomforting emotions in students and ourselves—M.P. and I.G., the teachers in this project—we discussed the possibility of addressing these discomforting emotions pedagogically in the classroom in ways that would enable our students to channel their emotional discomfort into opportunities for action in society based on empathy and solidarity. This pedagogy, called the pedagogy of discomfort (Zembylas 2014, 2015), was novel in both contexts, and we feared controversies would arise. We were experiencing the "emotion labour" discussed above, i.e., a dilemma between institutional conditions (expectations, established ways of doing things) and our pedagogical preferences at the time. We decided to fol-

low Benesch's (2020) suggestion to see our emotion labour productively as a springboard for activism.

Furthermore, we made conscious efforts to handle our emotion labour with academic integrity (Maxwell 2008; Macfarlane 2010; Macfarlane et al. 2014; Rawdin 2018), a key concept that became the ethical basis for our project, and that replaces prescriptive codes of practice that are usual in many educational contexts with the proactive development and cultivation of academic and professional virtues. Teaching with integrity means that teaching is not disconnected from the environment in which it takes place. It means taking into account the singularity of the case at hand and acting as an individual (Maxwell 2008). Rawdin (2018) develops this position by arguing that, while a principle-based approach emanating from codes and regulations leads to absolute positions and normative expectations of the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and practises of an ethical educator, a virtue-based approach favours "increased professional autonomy" (Rawdin 2018, p. 6; see also O'Neill and Bourke 2010). For Rawdin, "[T]to be virtuous is to choose the right course of action and is particular to the individual moral agent at any given historical and cultural moment, implying a level of relativity that contrasts with the universality of principlism" (2018, p. 6). One political implication of a virtue-based approach is that 'virtuous' teachers have more power to decide. Specifically, they have a range of virtues: courage, resoluteness, respectfulness, sincerity, humility, and reflexivity (Macfarlane 2010).

While Rawdin (2018) warns that the development and cultivation of these virtues is difficult in practical terms, we faced these difficulties, and the ethical dilemma posed by emotion labour, by strengthening our resolve to explore a traumatic event occurring in the present time, being willing to experience a—for us—new pedagogy, carefully planning our project, having quick flexibility, and approaching this task with responsibility, discipline, sincerity, and cultural humility. These are characteristics that identify critical professionals (Barnett 1997) whom Trede and McEwen describe as people who

> "are capable of making professional judgments and decisions rather than blindly following rules or common practices, and are responsible professionals who seek both to optimize growth and wellbeing and to minimise harm to self and others. (. . .) They also understand what is possible: how to operate and effect change, or what needs to be perpetuated and what can be transformed (how and when)". (Trede and McEwen 2012, p. 38)

Our emotion labour in combination with this vision of academic integrity and critical professionalism was evident in the main goal that we envisioned for our courses that year, captured in a question that guided our approach and teaching practises: 'How can the exploration of trauma and suffering associated with COVID-19 become a site of ethical, political and personal transformation in our settings?' (project plan, April 2020). This question represented our handling of the ethical dilemma at hand and the transformation of our emotion labour as a form of activism. Our answer to this question lay in the combination of pedagogies of intercultural citizenship, discomfort and the arts, which became our way of engaging ourselves and our students in activism.

From the pedagogy of discomfort (Zembylas 2014), we engaged students with a difficult and discomforting theme, which led students to feel pain, anguish and other discomforting emotions, and addressed the theme and the pain pedagogically in ways that enabled them to channel their emotional discomfort into opportunities for transformative action in society—taken from the pedagogy of intercultural citizenship—based on empathy and solidarity. The focus of this transformation is two-fold: of themselves and of the society around them (Porto and Zembylas 2022). Our arts-based pedagogy (Hackett et al. 2017) enabled and fostered these processes of transformation because the expression and channelling of such emotions occurs not only through linguistic forms of meaning making but

also creative and artistic, involving multimodal semiotics, for instance using music, video, drama, dance, poetry, movement, images, and more (Porto et al. 2023).

Consequently, our pedagogies in combination foregrounded the limits of language in expressing difficult or otherwise painful topics, emotions and experiences and, in contrast and, instead, embodied affective and artistic expression (Harvey and Bradley 2023). In doing so, we took a decision which challenged the usual conceptualisation of language and intercultural communication in our and many other contexts as to what counts as learning language and intercultural communication competences.

In short, the COVID-19 pandemic and our project prompted us to re-conceptualise our roles as teachers. As well as being teachers focused on language and intercultural communication, we had decided before the pandemic to introduce intercultural citizenship as one of our educational aims. Due to the pandemic, we recognised the need to address emotional challenges through an innovative approach that integrates pedagogies of discomfort and arts-based methods. This raised ethical questions to which we responded through our commitment to academic integrity and critical professionalism, enabling us to navigate our emotional labour.

5.2. The COVID-19 Pandemic as a 'Difficult Topic'

The first ethical dilemma we faced concerning the difficult topic was whether the pandemic could be compared with those traumas usually associated with pedagogies of discomfort such as war, dictatorship, genocide, and human rights abuse. This dilemma was part of our emotion labour too. Our documented conversations over email and telephone reveal that we feared we could be perceived as banalising and instrumentalising trauma associated with war or similar historical events. At the time, the only certainty was that the virus was causing significant deaths in many countries, there were both primary and secondary victims, and the collective loss of tertiary victims extended throughout societies and countries as it was an international catastrophe affecting everyone around the globe instead of specific groups. On this understanding, we made the decision to define the pandemic as a 'difficult' topic.

By mid-2024, at the moment of writing, there is consensus that COVID-19 is indeed a difficult topic (Faulstich Orellana et al. 2022). It confronted humanity with "massive unthinkable disaster (. . .) shattering one's worldview" (Zembylas and Bekerman 2008, p. 146) in previously unimagined ways—the essence of how 'difficult' themes are understood and theorised. Papastephanou et al. (2020) argue that the pandemic revealed disturbing inhuman, uncaring, and numbed responses to the value of life in some places in various disguises and discourses. Butler (2015, 2020) draws attention to the precariousness of some lives and not others in the face of the virus because of inequalities of all kinds. Referring to the pandemic, Zembylas wonders "whether there can be any viable pedagogical response that would further possibilities for justice in this world" (Papastephanou et al. 2020, p. 4) and proposes a 'pedagogy for precarity' in the post-COVID-19 era that raises awareness of "the sacrifice of some (vulnerable/lower class) people to ensure the safety of (privileged) others" and that "links pedagogical practices to debates over the purposes of education in a global community haunted by the deaths of hundreds of thousands of precarious lives" (Papastephanou et al. 2020, p. 4).

In retrospect, then, we believe that our independent decision at the time to address the pandemic as a difficult topic and to break away from standard procedures and practises through our combination of pedagogies of intercultural citizenship, discomfort and the arts was justified. In our project, we made the choice to focus on suffering and death instead of trivial themes. We addressed and monitored emerging ethical dilemmas related to the

theme through our action research approach, which allowed us to make adjustments as described above.

Our second ethical decision was related to the fact that introducing discomforting themes in the classroom and handling students' emotions pedagogically is a political decision (Kretz 2014; Leibowitz et al. 2010) due to questions discussed earlier of instrumentalisation, representation, appropriation and consumption of other people's suffering. We discussed additional issues that we had not initially considered and sketched them in our planning notes and reflection logs. One issue was that we might be perceived as intending to cause discomfort on purpose, disrupting the notion of classrooms as safe spaces. Another issue was that students might perceive this discomfort and suffering as too overwhelming, in which case, we could be seen as inflicting ethical violence (Zembylas 2015) on them, importantly too, closure would occur (Walker and Palacios 2016), and the possibility of personal and social transformation would be occluded, making discomfort pedagogically unproductive.

So, it was clear to us that our pedagogical handling of discomfort had to be 'productive', which we agreed we would understand as practical teaching that would challenge such disturbing emotions and help students transform them into opportunities for hope. We decided to use arts-based pedagogies to achieve this and, finally, decided to enact intercultural citizenship education by encouraging students to take civic actions during their learning at university in order to transform their suffering associated with COVID-19 into hope, albeit in modest ways.

In short, in examining our understanding of 'productive discomfort' in our project, we addressed the third ethical concern: the harm produced by discomfort and how it could be minimised by helping students face the moral demands of their community actions. In doing so, we were aware of the problems of 'passive empathy' (Boler 1999), 'empty empathy' (McLean 2023) and 'sentimentality' (Porto et al. 2023), concepts that refer to the superficial recognition of suffering and pain and the superficial expression of emotions which may be strong (Hållander 2019; Zembylas and Bekerman 2008) but do not trigger in students any responsibility for transformative action.

By contrast, a critical orientation to a pedagogy centring on disturbing emotions (Bozalek et al. 2014; Hållander 2019; Kretz 2014; Zembylas 2013b, 2021) reclaims such superficial emotional engagement by providing an orientation towards action, critical empathy, and solidarity. It does so by enabling and fostering a vision of agency and solidarity for students as they are encouraged to engage in pragmatic everyday actions with modest but nonetheless significant impacts such as helping people in need, making donations, sharing information and advice on social media, and raising awareness among family and friends.

This conceptualisation of critical pedagogical engagement with difficult themes avoids the risk of instrumentalisation of suffering and death. As a first step, it comprises a conscientious approach that purposefully acknowledges the challenges arising from students' emotional engagement with difficult content. Such challenges need to be effectively identified, analysed, confronted, and navigated. As a second step, those challenges need to be transformed into opportunities for designing pedagogical activities that minimise them, and we turn now to illustrating such activities from the project.

So far, our discussion has analysed our decisions and actions as teachers. The following examples show how we engaged in strategic pedagogical action in the classroom to address the ethical dilemmas discussed so far. In our project, we counterbalanced suffering with hope, care, and empowerment through the students' own stories of hope on COVID-19, mediated through the arts, and oriented towards community engagement. In this way, we were adopting new teacher roles to foster what we considered to be a 'good' education

(Biesta 2024) in the handling of a difficult topic. For example, one US-based student with Bolivian background started dancing a traditional Bolivian dance with traditional clothing so as to combat her negative feelings. She expressed feeling 'down and unmotivated'. Her artistic creation was a self-portrait depicting herself practising this dance. She used her artistic creation as a springboard for action to help others cope with isolation through dancing. In turn, one Argentinian student, who explicitly asked for her name to be visible in a publication, reconfigured the meaning of a local drink called mate in the face of health prevention measures against COVID-19. Mate is drunk by sipping hot water imbued in natural herbs using a straw that is shared with others in social gatherings. The student photographed this drink artistically and signed the photograph with her name in waterproof. She set the scene, decorated it, created the light effects and thought of ways of conveying her message, which was to show that 'the mate is also in quarantine' (Figure 2). She then surveyed her Instagram followers about their uses of mate during the pandemic to raise awareness of the importance of finding new and safe ways of socialising.

Figure 2. *Mate* in quarantine. Coping with discomforting emotions using photography.

Another example comes from a mixed nationality group of Argentinian and US-based students who created a Tik-Tok video in which they took the position of a health worker, a patient with COVID-19, an unemployed person, a student, and an old person. They placed themselves in these people's shoes with questions and comments: 'will I get better?', 'I hope I don't infect my family as well' (patient), 'I'm afraid to get the disease and die' (old person), 'will I get my job back' (unemployed person), 'am I going to have a graduation?' (student), 'I've been working nonstop' (healthcare worker) (Figure 3). Their aim was to raise awareness in their community and in society more generally about the role of artistic means to cope with the isolation and dangers generated by the pandemic and to contribute modestly to social transformation, for instance, by helping people feel less lonely and protect themselves from the virus.

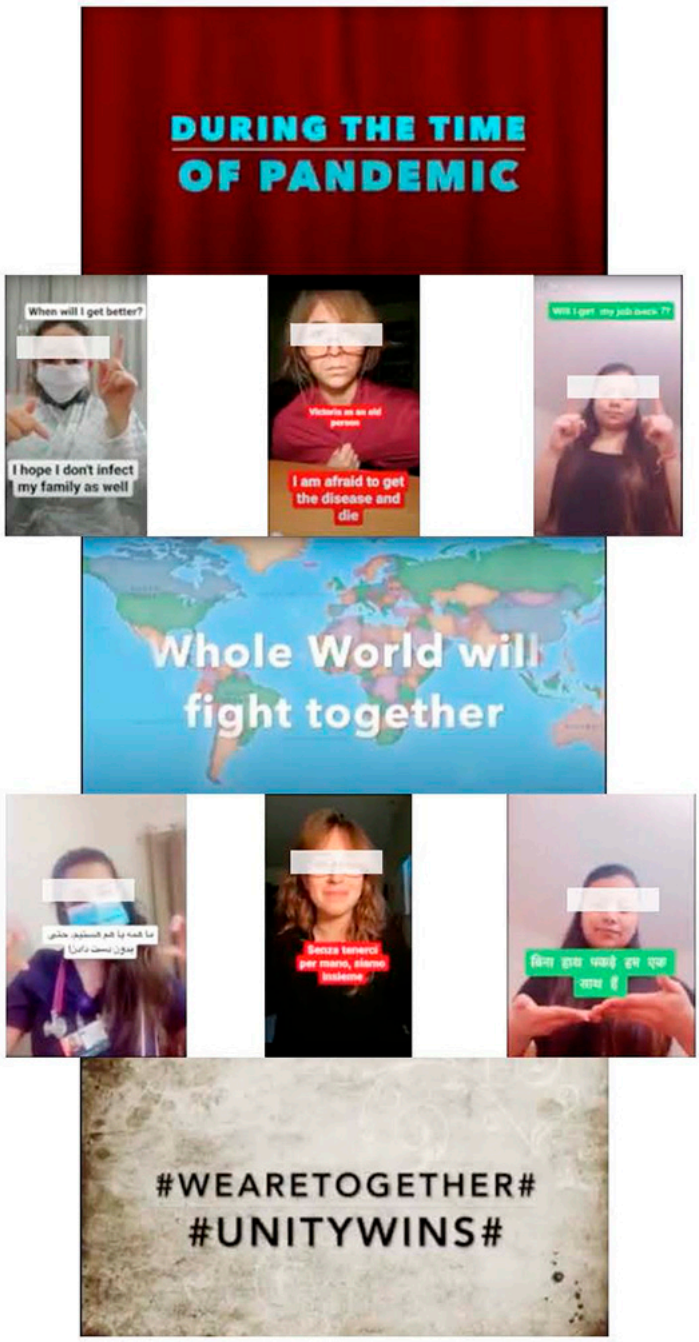

Figure 3. Tik-Tok video. Acting in the community.

Finally, the students' discomforting feelings arising from the difficult theme were minimised by the project through its design as intercultural citizenship. Table 1 shows that, at the beginning of the project, students reported feeling overwhelmed, anxious, anguished, isolated, and sad. Furthermore, when asked about helping others and their actions as responsible citizens during the pandemic, the students mentioned their self-care such as wearing masks, using gloves, keeping social distance, and staying at home. Towards the end of the project, they demonstrated care oriented towards their community and society: helping elderly people by doing grocery shopping, raising awareness, donating food, providing emotional, mental and financial support, healing stress by reaching out to people, and sharing positive thoughts on social media. They also expressed that they considered the project had been useful to cope with their discomforting feelings (see Table 2).

Table 1. Students' feelings before the project (collected through a pre-project online survey).

Argentinian Students' Adjectives Associated with Suffering from the COVID-19 Crisis	US-Based Students' Adjectives Associated with Suffering from the COVID-19 Crisis
Angry, anguished, annoyed, anxious, concerned, confused, depressed, disappointed, disconnected, doubtful, fearful, frustrated, impatient, interrupted, irritated, isolated, lonely, lost, negative, nervous, overwhelmed, restless, restricted, sad, scared, shocked, stressed, terrified, tired, uncertain, uneasy, unfocused, unproductive, unsettled, upset, weary, worried	Anxious, confused, disturbed, downhearted, frustrated, grumpy, irritated, isolated, helpless, hopeless, moody, nervous, sad, sceptical, stressed, tired, wary, worried

Table 2. Students' post-project feedback (collected through a post-project online survey).

Argentinian Students' Post-Project Feedback	US-Based Students' Post-Project Feedback
"My thoughts at the time were that we were going through the same thing together. I could understand what they meant or their point of view towards this situation because we were experiencing the same thing together"	"My feelings and emotions at the time were kind of nervous because I wasn't sure of how this was going to go with us being in two different places working on an online course. Also, I was also excited because I wanted to learn about the culture in Argentina".
"My thoughts at the time were mostly about how wonderful this project was to develop language and cultural skills, as well as to get better informed about what some communities different from ours are going through".	"my thoughts during the time were I was happy I got to do something fun and unique with people from another country!"

Overall, this section shows the importance of carefully designing pedagogical tasks, which, in our case, were arts-based and community-oriented, that unequivocally encourage students to draw critical and in-depth emotional connections with various aspects of the difficult theme. We have addressed and counterbalanced some of the challenges of addressing difficult content in the classroom by encouraging students to take action in their community as a result of the work in mixed groups and a transnational perspective. In this way, suffering and pain were palliated through empathy and solidarity, as described in detail in Porto et al. (2023). Below, we summarise the main issues analysed in this paper, the premises of integrating pedagogies of discomfort and arts-based methods into intercultural citizenship education, and the ethical challenges involved, as well as practical outcomes in the form of actionable steps and strategies (see Table 3).

Table 3. Actionable practical outcomes.

Areas for Analysis	Teacher Roles	Difficult Themes
Premises	• Humanism • Personal and civic development of students • Individual and social transformation • Linguistic and artistic means and resources for making meaning	Introduce and sensitise students to controversial and discomforting themes and to suffering as an opportunity for creating openings for empathy, solidarity and hope
Issues addressed in this article	• Are citizenship goals in intercultural citizenship feasible? • What counts as language and intercultural learning? • What dilemmas arise when institutions and other stakeholders have different philosophies of education? • What characteristics of teachers are implied by certain practises, standards and procedures? Is the teacher expected to adhere rigidly to codes, regulations, and norms or is there room for autonomy, criticality, self-cultivation, and academic/professional responsibility? • How to resolve the dilemma of emotion labour vs. activism? • How to deal with difficult topics (if at all) in educational contexts where this philosophy of education and pedagogic approaches (arts-based, community oriented, pedagogies of discomfort) can lead teachers to experience discrimination and censorship, and their jobs can be threatened?	• Is a difficult topic such as COVID-19 comparable with other social and historical traumas? • In the face of the potential instrumentalization of suffering, how do teachers decide if they are exposing students to unnecessary harm or helping them to face moral demands in the here and now? • How to avoid instrumentalisation of trauma and objectivization of suffering? • How does massive encounter with suffering affect mental health of students, and teachers?
Practical outcomes	• Foster a culture of academic integrity and ethical responsibility in the classroom. • Advocate for a virtue-based approach that promotes critical thinking. • Position teachers as critical professionals who engage in innovative practises. • Develop clear guidelines that address the political nature of language and intercultural communication education.	• Encourage teachers to be critical professionals who actively assess and navigate risks in discussions on difficult topics. • Design pedagogical activities that prioritise student emotional well-being. • Promote contextualised decision making that considers local community impacts. • Utilise artistic expression to transform disturbing emotions into opportunities for personal and civic growth. • Facilitate critical discussions that encourage students to take responsibility for transformative action. • Empower students through sharing their stories and lived experiences related to difficult topics.

6. Implications and Conclusions

Our aim in this paper has been to introduce ethical issues when language teaching goes beyond teaching linguistic and intercultural competences. We have illustrated the discussion from the example of a particular project and shown how we dealt with the specific ethical issues arising from it, such as the 'instrumentalisation' of suffering. Analysing the challenges arising from intercultural citizenship education in terms of teacher roles and difficult themes, our emotion labour emerged as a means of handling these difficulties. It was our emotion labour which motivated us to combine intercultural citizenship, pedagogies of discomfort, and arts-based methods in our classrooms. We have characterised the image of the teacher implied by our project using Macfarlane's (2010) notion of teaching/research integrity and Barnett's (1997) and Trede and McEwen's (2012) concept of the critical professional. These notions give teachers autonomy in the exercise of their academic and professional responsibility in specific contexts with a critical spirit.

We have argued that it is important to handle students' emotions arising from difficult themes pedagogically in ways that avoid passive and empty empathy and lead to opportunities for hope, active empathy, and solidarity. In this respect, we have also emphasised the importance of fostering community engagement so that students can make connections with the moral demands placed by particular situations and cases in their own settings, engage with those demands emotionally and artistically, and face them by taking civic action in their communities. In this way, openings for empathy, solidarity, and hope can be secured. This approach does, however, introduce ethical challenges which do not arise in the teaching of communicative and intercultural competences, and we have used the example to illustrate what these are and how teachers can address them.

To sum up, we have proposed an ethical foundation in language and intercultural communication education to address the suffering and pain related to difficult topics which can be used as a basis for reflection across the curriculum. We have also stated that the combination of language teaching with pedagogies of intercultural citizenship, discomfort, and the arts opens up opportunities as well as challenges that need further theoretical and pedagogical investigation.

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