

Interculturality and the study abroad experience: Students' learning from the IEREST materials

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Abstract

This study investigated how a “while abroad” (IEREST) intercultural experiential learning programme i) encouraged mobile student sojourners to explore the concept of “interculturality”; ii) promoted their intercultural engagement/communication during their stay abroad; and iii) invited them to reflect on their own (developing) interculturality. As students demonstrated their intercultural learning and perspectives, how did they (re)interpret and (re)construct the IEREST learning materials? Data drew on questionnaires, reflective journals and focus groups from two groups of mobile university students (in Italy and the United Kingdom). The findings illustrated how students' initial expectations of the programme (meeting new people, improving language) were exceeded. Through reflection of experience, and discussion with peers, tutors, members of the host community students realised that “interculturality” is multifaceted and complex; they expanded their small culture spheres to explore community cultures (gender, age, locality); they acknowledged the effort, work, and time required in interpreting bilateral understandings of self and other, and the possibilities of such understandings for global/intercultural citizenship. The outcomes offer implications for intercultural learning and training in the study abroad context, materials development, and further research concerning student mobility and intercultural education in other contexts.

La ricerca ha inteso investigare le modalità attraverso cui un programma di educazione interculturale, basato su un approccio esperienziale e rivolto a studenti universitari in mobilità (IEREST), i) abbia incoraggiato gli studenti ad indagare sul concetto di ‘interculturalità’; ii) abbia promosso il loro impegno e la comunicazione interculturali; iii) li abbia sostenuti nella riflessione sul proprio sviluppo di capacità interculturali. Ci si è pertanto chiesti in quale modo gli studenti abbiano recepito, reinterpretato e ricostruito i concetti sottostanti ai materiali didattici IEREST. I dati, raccolti in Italia e nel Regno Unito mediante questionari scritti, diari riflessivi e focus group, mostrano come gli studenti abbiano acquisito una consapevolezza interculturale oltre le loro aspettative iniziali (incontrare persone nuove, migliorare la lingua). Attraverso la riflessione sulle esperienze vissute e attraverso l’interazione con i propri pari, con gli insegnanti e con membri della comunità locale, gli studenti hanno compreso che l’“interculturalità” è un concetto sfaccettato e complesso; hanno allargato il proprio orizzonte culturale esplorando culture legate a genere, età e specificità locali; hanno riconosciuto lo sforzo, il lavoro e il tempo necessari a raggiungere una comprensione reciproca del sé e dell’altro, e le possibilità che tale comprensione offre per lo sviluppo di una cittadinanza globale e interculturale. I risultati della ricerca offrono indicazioni per l’apprendimento e la pratica interculturali nell’ambito delle esperienze di studio all’estero, per la realizzazione di materiali didattici e per ulteriori studi riguardanti sia la mobilità studentesca che l’educazione interculturale in altri contesti.

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Introduction

Within the framework of higher education, study abroad is considered important in developing graduates who will become global or critical intercultural citizens, that is, individuals who are critically aware and responsible, can critique different social discourse, and can take action against social injustices, inequalities and other challenges posed by globalisation and development in the world (Byram, 2006; Crosbie, 2014; George-Jackson, 2010; Guilherme, 2002; Jackson, 2008). Further, Giroux (2002) argues that Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) are one of the few public spaces remaining where students can 'learn the power of questioning authority, recover the ideas of engaged citizenship, reaffirm the importance of the public good, and expand their capacities to make a difference' (p. 450).

The *Intercultural Educational Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers* (IEREST) project materials have been designed to respond to this need, while simultaneously promoting opportunities for increased intercultural self-awareness-raising during a study abroad experience. However, the success of this aim is unknown without systematic investigation. Thus, our purpose here is to explore, through a study, if and how the IEREST materials support mobile students in understanding and reflecting on their (developing) intercultural perspectives and learning. Further, as part of this learning, we want to investigate how the students respond to the IEREST materials, and whether they possibly (re)interpret and (re)construct the IEREST materials.

The aims of the IEREST project are embedded in a particular philosophical stance towards intercultural communication: the concept of "interculturality". Interculturality encourages individuals to resist 'large culture' essentialist representations of otherness (Holliday, 1999), often manifested in the fixed system of one language-one culture-one nation, which may deny the complex webs or flows of meaning individuals construct in communication with one another, and within and across groups (Canagarajah, 2013; Dervin, 2012; Holliday, 2011). The IEREST materials seek to develop a deeper knowledge and appreciation of one's own and others' multiplicity (IEREST, 2015), by inviting students to i) explore their own autonomy in the world—and beyond their classroom experiences—by engaging in and reflecting on sustained encounters with local community groups and individuals; ii) understand that interculturality in contemporary society is a complex concept, and iii) reflect on the myths of student mobility, and thus, set realistic goals (Beaven & Borghetti, 2014). This understanding is prompted by processes of experiential learning, analysis and reflection (Kolb, 1984) based in intercultural communication and encounters.

The literature on study abroad highlights how contact alone with "cultural" others does not necessarily result in development of intercultural awareness described above (Byram & Dervin, 2008; Byram & Feng, 2006; Cicchelli, 2014). Kinginger (2015) highlights the need for intercultural preparation and education where study abroad is concerned so that mobile students learn to explore the experience of otherising and being otherised, and of 'discover[ing] their own image in the eyes of their hosts' which may be unsettling (p. 7). Processes of sustained engagement and critical (self) reflection have been demonstrated as important in learning to understand others as well as the self

(Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Savicki, 2008). By inviting students to reflect on their intercultural experience, the IEREST materials promote individuals' intercultural learning and awareness, and hence, the possibilities for transformation and the expansion of their small cultural spheres (Holliday, 1999). The materials also provide opportunities to meet others in and beyond the community, and thus, enable Erasmus students to better understand their broader socio-cultural environment beyond their Erasmus "bubble".

To explore these processes in our study, we drew on the "while abroad" IEREST module, activities designed to encourage students to question their own assumptions and reflect on concepts they might not have been aware of previously concerning mobility while they are abroad (Holmes, Bavieri, & Ganassin, 2015). We were also interested in finding out how students made sense of the IEREST materials during this reflective learning process. Therefore, the study addresses these research questions:

RQ1: How do the IEREST materials support mobile students in understanding and reflecting on their (developing) intercultural perspectives and learning?

RQ2: How do mobile students draw on, and possibly (re)interpret and (re)construct, the concepts that underpin the IEREST materials in demonstrating their intercultural perspectives and learning?

The IEREST "while abroad" pedagogy and conceptual focus informing the study

For this study, we drew on research we undertook while piloting the "while abroad" module IEREST activities with Erasmus and international students in our own institutions: the University of Bologna, Italy; and Durham University, United Kingdom (UK). The learning objectives of the module, in broad terms, seek to encourage mobile students to: i) understand the concept of interculturality; ii) make sense of their intercultural engagement and communication during their stay abroad; and iii) reflect on their own (developing) interculturality vis-à-vis their intercultural communication with others (including all students and people in the local community). While the piloting enabled us to trial the materials, their usefulness and, possibly, their inadequacy required deeper analysis of students' experiences by investigating what the students recounted about their learning experiences vis-à-vis the materials.

We piloted all three "while-abroad" activities: "24h Erasmus life", "Intercultural geography", and "Experiencing interculturality through volunteering" ("Volunteering"). The activity "24h Erasmus life" invited students to reflect on their while-abroad intercultural experiences across four themes: the emotional experience of living abroad; students' social contacts within the Erasmus or international community as well as with local people; academic life in the host institution; and their language experiences. "Intercultural geography" invited students to reflect on how their host environment (university, city, neighbourhood)—is shaped by history, culture(s), inhabitants, and the spaces inhabitants occupy. *Volunteering* encouraged students to create opportunities to engage with local people through volunteering within an organization in the community.

The tasks within each of the three activities are underpinned by Kolb's (1984) cyclical phases of experiential learning, analysis, and critical reflection. By undertaking tasks that reflect these aspects of learning, students begin to develop an awareness of self and other, and recognise the subjectivity and instability of their own and others' worldviews. Through activities based on co-

constructed learning, they begin to recognise and understand potential similarities and differences, dispel myths, (re)frame expectations, and set realistic goals concerning study abroad experience (IEREST, 2015).

Several key theoretical concepts inform the tasks within the three activities. The first concerns the importance of recognising that group formation is ongoing and dynamic, and that bounded and static notions of nation state—what Holliday (1999) refers to as large cultures—invoke stereotypical and essentialist understandings of others and their language, culture and identity. A second concept concerns multilingualism and the role of lingua francas, including promoting among students attitudes of tolerance and accommodation of language errors. Linked to the presence of multiple languages in intercultural communication is the place of translanguaging, a multilingual competence that enables the symbiotic and strategic use of one's linguistic repertoire for communicative purposes (Canagarajah, 2013). Finally, Oberg's (1960) stale concept of culture shock (a 'U-curve' delineating individuals' stages of adaptation and adjustment in a foreign place) gives way to a more nuanced understanding of adjustment, whereby students come to understand the dangers of attributing uncomfortable feelings towards diversity—as manifested in emotional attachment to home—and ethnocentric, positive attributions towards one's own group or country. Instead, students are encouraged to develop a stronger sense of critical self-awareness and autonomy.

In the next sections we present the methodology of the study we employed to address our research question.

The methodology of the study

Here we describe the sample (the two groups of mobile, international students), data collection and analysis procedures, ethics, language issues, and scope of the study.

The sample

At Bologna, the sample consisted of 19 incoming students (12 females and seven males) coming from 12 different countries: Australia, China, Colombia, Germany, Iran, Ireland, Moldova, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, and the UK. Participants were enrolled in undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate programmes (Medicine, Arts, Humanities, Foreign Languages, and Economics). The majority of the participants (15) were mobility students (Erasmus, Erasmus Mundus or from other mobility programmes); the remainder (four) were international students. The students' residence varied (from one month to more than one year). The Durham sample consisted of seven postgraduate international students (five females and two males) from China, Japan, Italy and Romania. Some of the students had previous experience of living and studying abroad. Their residence in Durham varied from a few months to two years. In both sites the researchers invited, via email, exchange and international students to participate in the workshops (a list of these students was provided by the universities' international offices).

Data collection and analysis

The data set from Bologna derived from the 15-hour activity *24h Erasmus life*, which consisted of six classes. In the final class students prepared a presentation based on their discussion of the emergent issues. Students' personal journals and reflection constituted the leitmotiv of the overall activity. During the final class, students had to accomplish Task 4, the active experimentation task according to Kolb's cycle (1984). Students planned and delivered a presentation to other Erasmus/international students who had not attended the activity. They focused on the themes of emotions and social contacts, and on language use and academic life. The data came from the video and audio-recordings of this final phase of the activity. Through negotiation with students, the researcher included a questionnaire as students, for practical reasons, preferred to respond to written questions. (Six out of 19 students completed the questionnaires).

The data set from Durham derived from the piloting of the other two activities: "Intercultural geography" and "Volunteering". Five students participated in the two 9-hour activities which consisted of three sessions of three hours each. The sessions included theory-based content, practical work and group discussions. The Durham data were primarily drawn from two focus groups held in the final sessions of each activity, but also a written report (from "Intercultural geography"), and a diary documenting their experience of volunteering (from "Volunteering").

The Bologna and Durham data sets, both taken from academic contexts, share common features oriented to a specific goal, involve specific verbal discourse constraints, and are associated with inferential procedures that are specific to the institutional context (Drew & Heritage, 1992). The emic perspectives, provided by the Durham focus groups, were complemented by the Bologna questionnaires, a methodological tool used more in socio-psychological and psychological approaches (for example, Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). However, both methods drew on the same open-ended questions on the following topics: (1) motivation to attend the course and level of satisfaction; (2) reflections on learning, especially in relation to the experience abroad; (3) understanding of the term "interculturality", including a definition and illustrations of this understanding; and (4) evaluation of the activity. These topics invited students' viewpoints on and spontaneous reactions to their experiences of interculturality across the three activities, revealing the significant traits of their learning experience.

Data were recorded, transcribed, and coded following Braun and Clarke's (2006) principles of thematic analysis, which involves researchers familiarizing themselves with the data, generating initial codes, searching for and reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes. To undertake this process the researchers initially coded their data separately, and then compared their codes in order to identify consistent themes and sub-themes. A comprehensive thematic map was used to create a final list of non-repetitive themes that resulted in a shared account of the emergent themes across all the data. Together, these processes provided a 'rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data' (p. 78) as presented in our findings below.

Ethics

The overall IEREST project received ethical approval from the University of Bologna's Ethics Committee. Prior to the data collection, students were informed of the purpose of the classroom sessions and piloting, and gave written consent. All participants were informed of the ethical principles of anonymity, the right to withdraw, and participants' rights to refuse to participate in or

answer questions about the study. Participation was voluntary, and students agreed that the data captured in the classroom could be used for research purposes.

Languages

In Bologna, because of the students' strong interest in developing Italian as a second or additional language, the teaching was mostly in Italian, the first language of the teachers, although all are fluent English language speakers. Largely, the students had a good level of Italian language competence: 15 possessed an upper intermediate level (B2); two an intermediate level (B1); and two an elementary level (A2). However, English was used to illustrate the theoretical concepts, or when students had difficulty following in Italian. In group discussions, students used either Italian or English as a lingua franca. Where the data was in Italian, transcriptions of classroom interactions and oral presentations were analysed and then translated into English by the second author. The language of written questionnaires was in English and so the students responded in English.

In Durham, the activities were taught in English, the lingua franca spoken by both students and teachers; however, one of the three teachers had Italian as a first language, which was useful in the analysis phase in working between the English and Italian sets of data. All the students spoke English as an additional language, with differing levels of proficiency. While some of the students shared a first language (Chinese), they were encouraged to use English in the classroom as a way of promoting full participation among all the participants. Thus, English only is present in the Durham data set.

Students' (re)interpretations and (re)constructions of the "while abroad" materials

Our research questions explore, first, how students made sense of their intercultural perspectives and intercultural learning, and second, how they drew on, and possibly (re)interpret and (re)construct the IEREST materials. We explore these questions across the three key objectives of the "while abroad" module (as highlighted earlier): students' understandings of the concept of interculturality; students' sense making of their intercultural engagement and communication while abroad; and their reflections on their (developing) interculturality.

Students' understandings of the concept of interculturality

Concerning students' understandings of "interculturality" (the first objective), three interconnected themes emerged in the classroom discussions: culture and interculturality seen as co-constructions shared among a group of people; a change in one's own perspectives to accommodate those of others; and critical engagement in intercultural encounters.

Students' understandings of interculturality are perhaps partly informed by their motivation for participating in the IEREST "while abroad" workshops. When asked about their motivation for participating, the Bologna students gave the following three reasons: to "make the most of Erasmus experience" (questionnaire 6); and to practise Italian and English (the course was held in both languages); and to "meet new friends" (questionnaire 5). No students referred to a particular interest in intercultural learning, possibly because they were not aware of it. One student only had previous

experience of intercultural learning; others had a vague awareness of some aspect of intercultural preparation which they had been offered as incoming students.

Through discussions with peers and teachers, guided tasks, and the IEREST guiding theories, the students began to articulate and reflect on their own understanding of the concept of interculturality. In *24h Erasmus life* students reviewed and co-constructed the term. They began by distinguishing between “cultural” and “intercultural”. Paola, writing a text together with Daniel, wanted to introduce a definition of intercultural learning in their presentation that she had inferred from her notes taken during the classes:

Paola: anche se qua in questo testo, Daniel, anche ti dice questa cosa che... (...) che l'apprendimento interculturale non è solamente apprendere o imparare cose del paese o della storia. È anche una cosa molto complessa che... costruita anche che ti permette di vedere il punto di vista dell'altro. E... come l'altro vede lo stesso e come l'altro vede il tuo punto di vista. Even if in this text, Daniel, it tells you this thing... (...) that intercultural learning is not only learning things of the country or the history. It is also a very complex thing which... constructed too, which allows you to see the point of view of others. And...how the other sees himself and how the other sees your point of view.

Paola's understanding shows how the general aim of the IEREST project—to offer a non-specific culture approach in intercultural education (IEREST, 2015)—is well understood by the students. This understanding then leads the students to consider another very important concept, namely, that culture is also constructed (as Paola says “constructed too”). In the following dialogue, Paola and Daniel come to understand that cultures can merge, intermingle, and result in a co-constructed new culture—an “Erasmus culture”, as Daniel notes. Here Paola is correcting Daniel while he is writing the common text for the presentation:

*Paola: e io farei una cosa, non c'è una cultura solamente, le culture, le culture
Daniel: delle culture?
Paola: delle culture diverse (silenzio mentre l'altro scrive) perché non è solamente la figura di un italiano
Daniel: no tipo no, dico di qualunque gruppo in generale
Paola: si si si si si
Daniel: dico delle identità delle norme delle culture... per esempio anche da noi ognuno ha una cultura diversa però alla fine tutti arrivano a una cultura erasmus, che identifica il gruppo.
Paola: delle culture.... E anche una cultura di base. Si può dire no? Perché sono tutte queste culture....(...) dopo, specifichiamo che non è solamente una cultura dominante, tutte queste culture div-
Daniela: comportamenti...
Paola: atteggiam- eh::: vissuti vissuti diversi. In ogni posto devi avere un'identità, delle norme, della cultura che permette di trovare un'unione delle persone che si incontrano in un gruppo (...) dopo tutti loro sono diversi perché presentano questo che non è una cultura, sono diverse culture.
Paola: and I would do one thing, there is no a single culture, cultures, cultures
Daniel: cultures?
Paola: different cultures (silence) because it is not only Italian
Daniel: no, a kind of, no, I mean, any group in general*

Paola: yes yes yes yes

Daniel: I mean of identities, of norms, of cultures... for example even in our group everyone has a different culture but in the end everyone arrives at an Erasmus culture, which identifies the group.

Paola: cultures....and even an initial culture. Can we say that? Because all these cultures are.... After that, we have to specify that there is not just a dominant culture, all these different cult-

Daniel: behaviours...

Paola: attitudes...ehm:::: past experiences, different past experiences. In any place you have to have an identity, norms, a culture which allows you to find union among the people in a group... of course all of them are different because they present something which is not a culture, they are different cultures.

By agreeing that the Erasmus culture constitutes different peer cultures, Paola and Daniel demonstrate an understanding of the theoretical concept learnt in the course (in the last turn), but they also try to refine it, going deeper. As evidenced in their exchange, they add, step by step, the possible elements that culture is composed of, defining culture as a complex intermingling of “behaviours”, “attitudes”, “past experiences”, “identity”, and “norms”. They recognise that all these elements have to be used “to find union among the people in a group”, not to differentiate people. Union in a culturally-differentiated group is very important for these students who, as demonstrated above, were motivated to attend the IEREST course to make new friends.

The reflection that culture is a dynamic ongoing co-construction within a group (Holliday, 1999), and not fixed, is also present in the feedback questionnaires. As one student wrote: “the merging of different cultures which becomes a new culture” (Questionnaire 3). The same dynamic, in-group co-construction is applied to the term “interculturality”:

From the term “interculturality” I understand something with more than one culture. Actually since we were a very diverse group in the means of interculturality I believe every moment of the course helped me shape this term in my mind with different ideas coming from every individual. (Questionnaire 2)

This student explains her understanding of the term “interculturality” by building on the direct experience she had in attending IEREST classes. In addition to the activity itself, the group composition (“very diverse”) may have impacted on her understanding of the dynamic nature of the concept.

The Durham data illustrated how students re-interpreted the IEREST materials to reflect on their own experiences of engaging with an intercultural other, moving beyond their own perspectives and accommodating those of others. For example, Aya, a postgraduate student from China, demonstrated how she (re)-constructed the concept of interculturality as a process of coming to understand and accept others’ perspectives during communication that may also include accommodating conflict:

Basically, the word [interculturality] means communication between different cultures but in reality it may also mean you need to push yourself to understand other cultures. Sometimes

people just want to see the perspective of their own culture and don't want to accept other conflict. Interculturality should encourage both sides to work together.

Aya acknowledged that accommodating and managing conflict is a bilateral process. By highlighting the need to "push yourself to understand other cultures" as "interculturality should encourage both sides to work together", Aya recognised how intercultural awareness requires effort both from both people in the host community and incoming students.

As we discussed earlier, Kinginger, (2015) describes international mobility as 'one of the most significant potential sources of intercultural awareness' where students discover 'their own image in the eyes of their hosts' (p. 7). By acknowledging the effort she needed to make in engaging with people in the host community, Aya adds to Kinginger's point. She is not simply seeing herself through the eyes of her hosts; she is engaged in a challenging process that requires effort.

Meg, an international post-graduate student from Japan, extended Aya's understanding to include interculturality as a learning process encompassing a multiplicity of social and political views:

Interculturality is related to political and social views. Others in the group are more critical and political, so I learned a lot. Everything I learned on the course can help me solve my everyday problems.

Meg constructed the value of the IEREST workshops and materials as supporting mobile students to solve their everyday problems abroad. Yet, her perspective also suggests that interculturality is a complex and multifaceted concept with a political and social dimension.

These two examples show the importance of peer discussion, provided by the IEREST workshops, in helping mobile students connect their "real life" experiences with the theoretical concepts of IEREST (e.g., "interculturality"). They also acknowledge that understanding interculturality is a complex issue, which the IEREST materials may not sufficiently address.

After attending the activity "Volunteering" and interacting with people in the host community, Wendy, an international postgraduate student from China, defined how the fourth phase in Kolb's (1984) model, "active experimentation", helped her to question her own understanding of interculturality:

I'm still wondering what the term "interculturality" really means! But from my experience of studying abroad, and working as a volunteer, I think that people have their positions and stereotypes. Although it is difficult to change these, we can respect them and attempt to see where they are coming from.

Through the IEREST workshops, Wendy drew on her practical experiences of studying and volunteering. She realized that interculturality is highly complex, and involves a multiplicity of perspectives which require effort to understand and account for. Again, this example demonstrates how the IEREST materials provide a useful trigger to reflect on the multidimensionality of interculturality, further illustrating the difficulty mobile students face in approaching and understanding the concept.

These examples demonstrate how the students, in reflecting on their intercultural experiences, employed extensive metalinguistic operations as they defined terms and articulated understandings of their emotional and social experiences. In doing so, they highlighted the critical work required to understand the social and political implications of being intercultural citizens (Bavieri 2009; Byram 2008). The implications of these broader commitments are further illustrated in the next theme.

Making sense of intercultural engagement and communication

Through the second objective we sought to understand how students explored their autonomy in the world beyond the class (in Italy, via the activity “24h Erasmus life”, and in the UK, through “Volunteering” and “Intercultural geography”). Exchanging and sharing, finding both similarities and differences, were two principal themes that emerged from the Bologna students’ reflections in their questionnaires:

I exchanged some ideas with people and I listened to different people around the world and with really diverse perspectives about life. ... It was another opportunity to know people everywhere and furthermore coming from different fields which make others’ point of view about the same things. (Questionnaire 5)

I didn't expect to learn that much about my own process of intercultural learning, about how I react in certain situations in this context and about my expectations of Erasmus/living in a foreign country. I was astonished how different everyone's experience can be and at the same time how many emotions/problems/events are shared by a majority of international students. (Questionnaire 4)

The recurrence of particular expressions, e.g., “participation” (“being part of”, “joining”, “combining different people in one single community”, “relating among different cultures”, “exchanging”, “communicating,” “sharing feelings and ideas with people who feel the same way”) showed how these students valued sharing experiences with new acquaintances. As Coleman’s (2015) findings demonstrated, meeting people represents the basis for learning interculturality. Through their discussion in the IEREST workshops students realise how they were undergoing this learning process—as illustrated above, with surprise and astonishment. So, classroom discussion of experience represented an important tool for students’ developing self-awareness.

In Durham, the “Volunteering” and “Intercultural geography” tasks enabled students to meet and share experiences with people in the host community and to reflect on these with peers and the teacher in the classroom. Angela, a postgraduate student from Romania, highlighted this reciprocity. She also pointed to the value of having a locally-based IEREST teacher who could present the perspectives of local people, and thus, help students interpret their own mobility experience:

[The teacher] was explaining our experiences from the point of view of a local and trying to say “well this is because...”. This helped us because we had a sense of our experiences from a different point of view.

The format of the IEREST materials allowed the students to reconsider and reevaluate their existing experiences through exposure to an alternative “place-based culture” (Najar 2015). Similarly, Aya highlighted the importance of reciprocal learning: students’ engagement with people in the local community enabled the latter to get to know international students, rather than see them merely as outsiders. Aya illustrates below how the IEREST activities and workshops enabled her to understand the role of local people as a function of interculturality, and vice-versa:

The course helped us to understand the local people. It would help locals to find out more about people from outside. So we could have more international students, not only from the EU area but also from other continents. Possibly people from different age groups for example older or younger people to get some other ideas. We don’t need to just understand them. They need to understand us.

This reflection touches on an important and under-investigated aspect of mobility and internationalization: student mobility offers opportunities for intercultural communication and understanding for all—mobile students, host students, and people in the community.

Through this intercultural engagement students considered their own and others’ preconceptions and stereotypes. For example, Wendy argued how stereotyping limited opportunities for intercultural communication:

I think each of us brings ideas and stereotypes about people from different countries, and I seldom get the opportunity to make contact with people from Europe.

The IEREST activities countered this potential barrier by prompting students to reflect on their previous encounters and discuss reasons for cultural differences while accepting that some differences were inevitable. For example, Aya discussed how conflict is part of the process of intercultural engagement:

I think I’m an international citizen, but during my stay here there will be some cultural conflict so it may be a way to narrow the gap with the local people ... to know the city and the people here. ... This course will encourage me to get more involved in the local society. I want to make friends with local people and gain more of an understanding of the culture.

By stressing the importance of active community engagement, and the desire to “make friends with local people and gain more of an understanding of the culture”), Aya understood the opportunities afforded by intercultural encounters. Her self-positioning as an international citizen possibly casts her as more worldly-wise, and undeterred, than the locals she encountered.

Lee’s volunteering experience with local elderly people provided an emotionally rewarding experience which enabled him to break out of his usual friendship network:

We discussed concepts such as “breaking the bubble” in the first session. I definitely had my awareness raised and I think the encouragement for getting involved in the local community is very important. ... It also broadened my experience here abroad, because I rarely had these kind of opportunities [to work with elderly people] in the past. I developed a good relationship with the gentleman I was helping to use the computer, which was extremely satisfying.

Sharing experiences with peers in the classroom was an important strategy that enabled students to move beyond their own perspectives and across age-related cultural boundaries to see those of older people (e.g., Aya and Lee). Students realised that successful interactions require patience (“wait one second”) and a favourable disposition towards others (“try to understand the background”). In the following passage, for example, the student uses the term “empathy”:

For me [the] most useful thing was the improving my ability to make empathy with other people. (Questionnaire 2)

Deardorff’s intercultural competence model (2006) allows for the ability of empathy as a desired internal outcome resulting from an informed frame-of-reference shift. The IEREST classes enhanced such relational abilities, and resulted in a perceived shift towards others in terms of flexibility and adaptability. Students explained the importance of sharing personal growth and the value of dialogue in this process:

We have to work any single day to deal with the problems which [require] more patience and tolerance, and dialogue is the unique way to arrive [at] a common goal. (Questionnaire 5)

They arrived at a conceptualisation of interculturality which included the universal value of mutual understanding:

Interculturality is the mutual understanding and the exchange of cultural experiences. (Questionnaire 6)

The terms “critical self-questioning”, “empathy”, “tolerance”, “mutual understanding” and “dialogue” used by the students in evaluating what they learnt in IEREST workshops might possibly show how students embarked on a pathway to becoming critical intercultural citizens. A critical intercultural citizen is a person who, according to Byram (2006, 2009), possesses a ‘critical cultural awareness (*savoir s’engager*), together with the awareness that intercultural encounters require ‘the constant negotiation between remembering and forgetting, idiosyncrasies and common interests’ (Guilherme, 2002, p.126). In supporting the students’ self-growth, awareness, and social/emotional development, the IEREST “while abroad” activities offered students opportunities to practise intercultural citizenship.

Reflecting on (developing) interculturality

The third objective of the “while abroad” module led us to investigate how students reflected on the different levels of their interculturality through their interactions with peer students, teachers, local people, and the environment. The key theme here is discovery: students’ discovery of their multiple identities through a reflection on language learning, and the possibilities for intercultural communication in previously uncharted geographical territory. As Deardorff (2006) notes, these are all requisite attitudes to developing intercultural competence. As shown in the questionnaires from Bologna, the second reason students gave for participating in the IEREST workshop was to practise language. As Norton (2000) noted, language learning constitutes part of the capital students invest, and for these students, language learning was part of the success of their stay-abroad experience.

Students highlighted the role of empathy in the language learning process. In her presentation Rosa, a Bologna student, explored the sense of menace and the emotional struggle she experienced as she confronted limited language abilities. She reflected on how language learning made her confront an identity that was not hers, and which was ascribed to her by others when speaking the foreign language (as discussed by Kinginger, 2015, and Kramsch, 2011):

chi vuole imparare una lingua, intanto vuole mantenere un ideale senso di sé, ma la difficoltà di imparare una lingua è una minaccia a quell’immagine ideale. Questo conflitto tra parlare una lingua e il senso del sé fa sì che non ci sentiamo molto bene, diciamo, che siamo frustrati, che abbiamo paura di essere fraintesi, che ci sentiamo come se non fossimo noi.

Those who want to learn a language want to maintain an ideal sense of self, but the difficulty of learning a language is a menace to that ideal image. This conflict between speaking a language and the sense of self makes us not feel very good, let’s say, we feel frustrated, we are afraid to be misunderstood, we feel as if we weren’t ourselves.

But, as she continued, the negative emotions changed into positive ones: once acquired, the linguistic competences and identities can be changed and assumed just for fun:

Ma quando abbiamo superato questo problema, ci sentiamo proprio padroni della lingua, possiamo esprimerci appieno come siamo... ci sentiamo benissimo, ci sentiamo noi stessi, anzi qualche volta ci divertiamo ad assumere un’altra identità, quello ad esempio ragazza italiana. Io, quando parlo italiano adesso, uso anche (ride) gesto (ride e fa movimenti con le braccia), modo di dire italiano, mi sento proprio una ragazza italiana.

But when we have overcome this problem, when we feel we are masters in that language, we can express ourselves as we are We feel very good, we feel we are ourselves, indeed sometimes we take on another identity just for fun, for example the one of an Italian girl. Take me: when I speak Italian now, I use gestures (she laughs), typical ways of saying, I feel really an Italian girl.

By playing with different identities, Rosa could choose the moment to act out an Italian female identity through gestures and expressions. As discussed by Plews (2015), she possibly uses her intercultural knowledge to position herself in another culture in order to make the most of her intercultural experience as an international student.

In reflecting on language learning, others shared Rosa’s experience, developing an understanding of the concept of multiple identity and its importance for interculturality. This

developing self-awareness was enhanced by peer reciprocal learning and, once again, through shared classroom experiences:

There were things I thought it would be just me that thought that way. For example, language: the fact that when you speak another language you create, you acquire another personality.... And I was like not saying anything, but someone else mentioned in the group, and the others kept saying “yes like me like me”, and I felt like, I don’t know, that kind of things you feel not so kind of alone, when other people have the same experience. (questionnaire 1)

Through the activity “Intercultural geography”), the Durham students reflected on how the environment impacted their developing self-awareness:

How important is the concept of geography when you go in a new place and how you discover that place in relation with what you are, what you do in that place, like you are a student. We saw the first time that most of us have a connection with university, college, and this is the centre [of our maps] but also there is the dark part, a place that you don’t go.

The IEREST materials encouraged Marco to explore the extremities of his intercultural sphere. By embracing the “dark part”, the physical unknown, through reflective observation (comparing and discovering places) and active experimentation (practice and ethnographic fieldwork), Marco was able to appreciate the responsibility her took in “shedding light” on his map and altering his relationship with his host environment, rather than being a passive by-stander. Angela highlighted the importance of classroom discussion in making links between actual experience prompted by the activity, and its implications for developing understandings of interculturality and self-awareness:

I have found out so many things about the local people ... about many places that I have never been to in Durham. ... Perhaps I could have spoken with my friends and colleagues but it is not the same. Here [in the classroom] we could express and analysed everything that we discussed.

Conclusions and implications of the study

The aims of our study were, first, to understand whether the IEREST materials achieved their goals in developing in students a deeper understanding of their own interculturality; and secondly, how the students drew on, and possibly (re)interpreted and (re)constructed the concepts underpinning the IEREST materials in the process.

Our findings revealed that the students’ learning experience exceeded the extrinsic goals they articulated at the outset. While students’ motivations to attend the IEREST courses were based on practical reasons, such as meeting friends, engaging with the host community and learning a new language, by the end of the programme, they had realized a deeper learning—of finding new forms of intercultural and self-awareness. This additional outcome needs to be foregrounded in the promotion of future IEREST workshops.

The IEREST materials are not aimed at transmitting ready-made definitions of interculturality; rather, they focus on generating and guiding discussion and self-reflection. As the findings illustrated, the IEREST materials, which promoted intercultural engagement outside the classroom, enabled students to undergo a reflective process of this intercultural communication in the classroom context. They engaged in metalinguistic activities such as defining, narrations and discussion of classroom episodes, interpretations of experience, and understandings and speculation of facts. They also problematised the theoretical concept of identity. Rosa's realisation that she could try out and put on different identities in her intercultural encounters illustrates how students started to look at themselves from different perspectives: i) of coming to understand the self through intercultural communication with others; and ii) reflecting on the perspectives of others as a way of understanding both self and other. As Kramsch clarifies (2009, p. 18): 'we only learn who we are through the mirror of the others, and, in turn, we only understand the other by understanding ourselves as Other'.

Second, Coleman (2015) notes that social networks are important for the learning outcomes of study abroad, and for understanding interculturality. Given students' motivations for attending the IEREST workshops, especially the desire to meet new people, the workshops allowed students to form new social networks within and outside the classroom, and beyond the student/university community. More importantly, the IEREST pedagogy provided the theoretical instruments to frame these encounters from an informed critical perspective—that individuals have multiple identities that they draw on in different contexts and for different purposes, that essentialist understandings of culture limit possibilities for individuals to realise their own and others' multiple identities, and that power relations, played out in students' small cultural encounters during their study abroad, affect intercultural communication.

A third outcome is the reciprocal learning that the IEREST workshops opened up between the mobile students and people in the host community. As the students engaged with people in small cultures (e.g., localities, language groups, and older people), their perspectives on these groups were challenged. The IEREST materials also unlocked opportunities for local people to understand mobile/international students, rather than see them as sojourners, outsiders, and culturally different. The class discussions provided the fora for students to interpret and their intercultural communication in these small cultures. The IEREST materials therefore have the possibility of breaking down the stereotype of mobile/international students as sojourners, whose stay is temporary, thus requiring no social or political investment by members of the host community.

Fourth, students stressed the critical work required in confronting their own cultural prejudice and internal self-conceptions. They realised that acknowledging others' perspectives might also include the need to deal with conflict, which required effort. Similarly, Holmes and O'Neill (2012) discussed how the students in their study found that understanding dual perspectives involved work, effort, and time as they grappled with confusion and contradiction present in their own worldviews and those of others. This processual and reciprocal aspect of intercultural learning, especially while abroad, has important implications for the focus, duration, and content of study abroad courses delivered by international offices, and challenges current practice consisting of pre-departure briefings concerning the practical aspects of study abroad.

Finally, according to Holliday (2015, p. 5), 'the important quest of this (IEREST) educational project is to search for and recover the humanity that we all have in common'. Our findings showed

that, through students' participation in the "while abroad" activities, they began to illustrate developments towards becoming intercultural citizens; that is, they began to recognise the importance of taking an active role in co-constructing an a-prejudiced community founded on common universal values (Osler & Starkey, 1996) such as empathy and mutual understanding.

In conclusion, our analysis has illustrated that students struggled to find univocal definitions of concepts linked to interculturality. Students acknowledged how the reflective process (on real life experience), supported by the IEREST course, helped them to understand that "interculturality" is multifaceted, contextual, open to individual interpretation, and complex. Despite all participants receiving the same theoretical input, their intercultural learning experiences led them to reinterpret and reconstruct theoretical concepts by highlighting different aspects. For example, they interpreted the concept of "interculturality" according to political and social facets, conflict and effort, self-awareness, a developing sense of citizenship, a recognition of small cultures (localities, age, gender), the need to differentiate "cultural" from "intercultural", and how learning another language contributes to identity construction. Our study has shown the value of the IEREST materials in enabling mobile students to understand this complexity. Indirectly, our study has highlighted the importance of appropriate teacher expertise and training in supporting such complex teaching and learning, especially in classroom discussions. This aspect needs deeper investigation.

Through our study, undertaken alongside the piloting of the IEREST "while abroad" activities, we have highlighted a non-essentialist and experiential learning approach to developing critical intercultural awareness—of self and other—through intercultural encounters and reflection. The study has highlighted the importance of a structured, classroom-based programme underpinned by theoretical concepts (e.g., "interculturality" and multiple identities) on intercultural learning for mobile students while abroad. The study also opens up possibilities for further areas of research: more in-depth research with other groups of mobile students in other contexts; further analysis of the IEREST materials and concepts as tools for developing understandings of interculturality and intercultural citizens; teacher training expertise and needs; and the applicability of IEREST materials in intercultural training with other groups such as international officers/administrators. Finally, although assessment appears minimally in the materials, we did not assess our students; the challenge of how to assess students' developing interculturality using the IEREST materials, and more generally, in study abroad programmes, warrants further critical investigation.

Student mobility raises questions concerning intercultural education for all, especially in the context of internationalisation. Our study has highlighted some of the unintended and unexpected outcomes of a "while abroad" programme in supporting and developing mobile students' intercultural learning, thus initiating an agenda for further research, materials development, and education concerning student mobility in other contexts.

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