

**Learning to live interculturally: an exploration of experience
and learning among a group of international students at a
university in the UK.**

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Abstract

In the past 30 years there has been a rapid and exponential growth in the numbers of people electing to complete all or part of their studies outside of their country of origin. This phenomenon has attracted considerable research attention, not least from those who are interested to describe the benefits seen to accrue from the opportunity this provides for an extended encounter with linguistic and cultural diversity. Notably, the widespread assumption that this can generate a new form of learning, commonly referred to as intercultural learning, which is understood to comprise increased tolerance, empathy and openness to the linguistic and cultural other. Despite the limited research data to substantiate these claims, among those interested to develop educational responses to globalization, the potential of intercultural contact to generate intercultural learning has considerable appeal and has been co-opted in the development of policy and practice to promote global citizenship at all levels of education. This has contributed to the emergence of a particular discourse about intercultural learning and is further fuelling the development of both short and long-stay study abroad programmes.

This discourse is, however, increasingly called into question on account of the perceived overly-simplistic constructions of interculturality and learning on which it is premised. In particular, there is a growing recognition of the need to develop situated accounts of people's everyday encounters with linguistic and cultural others which acknowledge the exigencies of the setting, as well as the impact of wider political economic and historical discourses on their positioning in intercultural encounters. The generation of 'thick' descriptions of people's lived experiences of interculturality in global educational contact zones, it is argued, can lead to a more nuanced account of the intercultural learning these can afford. This was the aim of the study reported in this thesis.

The study undertaken explores the relationship between an experience of interculturality and learning among 14 international students during their year-long sojourn at a university in the UK. Drawing upon a socially constructed relational understanding of learning informed by the

transactional and dialogic conceptualization of learning developed by Dewey and Bakhtin among others, the study sought to generate a narrative account of participants' experiences and learning generated from periodic individual and group interviews over the year as well as reflective accounts in participants portfolios and other opportunistic conversations recorded in the researcher log.

Primary analysis of the data revealed that participants' experiences generated a number of forms of learning. One of these, 'learning about self in relation to linguistic and cultural other' was identified as a form of intercultural learning, comprising learning to be more open to the other and learning about linguistic and cultural positioning. This was subsequently explored in more depth, revealing a complex interplay between these two elements and the strategic actions taken by participants to manage their encounters with linguistic and cultural others. These results revealed considerable differences in the learning trajectories and outcomes resulting from their intercultural encounter. The findings also point to the importance of sustained commitment to intercultural dialogue on the part of individuals and the perception of their ethical treatment by others as important to the direction their learning trajectories take.

On the basis of these findings, it is argued that while an encounter with linguistic and cultural other may lead to increased tolerance, empathy and openness to other associated with the way intercultural learning is employed in much of the research literature, the strategic actions learners take to negotiate their linguistic and cultural positioning will critically inform the extent to which they develop these qualities. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the ways in which a situated and relational conceptualization of interculturality and learning is seen to contribute to a more informed and deeper understanding of the sorts of intercultural learning that are made possible by an intercultural encounter. I also identify a number of research agendas which can build upon the insights provided by the study.

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