Modernization of Library and Information Science Education through the Enhancement of Intercultural Communication

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Abstract. This paper discusses the methodology used and some preliminary findings of the project that explored intercultural communication in library and information science education, more specifically in online learning environment. This research focuses on answering the following central question: What is the nature of successful intercultural communication and what are the factors and conditions which influence this? Findings of this research project can be used to develop a framework which identifies a series of factors and conditions that needs to be considered in the process of facilitating intercultural communication in library and information science education.

Keywords. Library and information science education, online education, e-learning, intercultural communication, qualitative study.

1. Introduction

Intercultural communication is becoming increasingly important in education but also in our society in general due to the rise of globalization and increasingly multicultural study and work environments. Therefore it is increasingly recognized that studies are needed to foster greater understanding of cultural differences and to provide support in the intercultural study environment.

This paper discusses the methodology used and some preliminary research results of the project that explored intercultural communication in library and information science (LIS) education, more specifically in online learning environment.

The results of the study will contribute to the enhancement of the ways in which students could be supported within international online programmes. Findings can be used to develop a framework which identifies a series of factors and conditions that need to be considered in the process of facilitating

intercultural communication in LIS curricula and can help guide academics in library and information science education.

2. Methodology

This study examines intercultural communication within European library and information science education in order to develop a framework that facilitates the effective development of international online curricula. This research focuses on answering the following central question: What is the nature of successful intercultural communication and what are the factors and conditions which influence this?

This study involved a qualitative study, a case study within a constructivist research paradigm. The constructivist research paradigm expresses the belief that there exists multiple socially constructed realities and reality is interpreted by individuals. Knowledge is created in interaction between the investigator and the research participant. The knower and the known form a dialectic unit and knowledge is inherently subjective, inherently structured by the subjectivity of the researcher (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003a; Badley, 2004; Virkus, 2011). Thus, understanding the world develops "at the reconstruction of previously held constructions" (Guba and Lincoln, 1998, p.209). "These varying constructions are interpreted using conventional hermeneutical techniques, and are compared and contrasted through a dialectical interchange" (ibid., p.207). Thus, "any bit of knowledge, however purified in the process of reporting it to a wider audience, bears the marks of its epistemic subject" (Breuer and Roth, 2003, para.1). Thus, the constructivist approach is sensitive to the specific context and uses various methods to understand how the people have experienced and "made sense of their practices from their perspective" (Ezzy, 2002, p.xii; Virkus, 2011).

A case study strategy allowed a combination of methods for in-depth data collection in order to obtain an understanding of sensitive and complex phenomenon and where little was known about the topic. Document analysis and semi-structured interviews were the main data collection methods in this study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two groups of students – students from the International Master in Digital Library Learning (DILL), and students from the Parma-Northumbria Joint Course, the International Master in Information Studies.

DILL is a two-year collaborative master program between Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences in Norway, Tallinn University in Estonia and Parma University in Italy. The programme was supported in the framework of the European Union Erasmus Mundus programme during the period 2007-2013. Erasmus Mundus is a cooperation and mobility programme in the field of higher education that aims to enhance the quality of European higher education and to promote dialogue and understanding between people and cultures through cooperation with Third-Countries. DILL was delivered on campus, and the students spent one term at each partner institution. The first three terms consisted of six modules, each amounting to 15 ECTS. In the first

semester at Oslo University College in Norway two modules were offered, then two modules were offered in the second semester at Tallinn University in Estonia and in the third semester two modules were offered at Parma University in Italy. In the last term the students wrote their Master's Thesis amounting to 30 ECTS. Students could choose to write their Master's thesis at either of the three partner institutions; this depended on the topic and the location of the main supervisor (Virkus, 2009). Currently the programme is running without Erasmus Mundus support and is delivered in distance learning mode. The Parma-Northumbria Joint Course, the International Master in Information Studies (MIIS) was delivered by distance, jointly by the University of Northumbria at Newcastle (UK) and the University of Parma (Italy) since 2000 (Virkus and Tammaro, 2005).

Thirty six in-depth interviews were conducted with students from eighteen countries; from Australia, Canada, Colombia, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Italy, Kenya, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Maldives, Malta, Romania, South Africa, Tanzania, and Thailand. All 18 students from DILL curriculum and 18 students from MIIS curriculum were interviewed.

An online interviewing tool Trillian (a free instant messenger) was used for interviews. It enabled to see when the interviewee was writing their messages (important for not interrupting the interviewee), enabled to keep an eye on time of sending the message (to offer help after a long pause) and it supported different (AIM, ICQ, MSN, Yahoo Messenger and IRC) protocols which allowed the students to participate in the interviews using a familiar communication tool and their existing accounts. It also gave the chance to save the interview in the case of an interruption and in order to further process the answers. It also supported the use of different emoticons and showed changes in the status (to see if the interviewee is online). Skype, Google Talk and e-mail were used in addition to Trillian.

A set of questions was prepared and interview guides were developed for DILL students and MIIS students. Two groups of students had to answer somewhat different questions: DILL students were asked about potential of using DILL programme in an online environment and the questions for MIIS programme students were mainly related to the online environment. Interviews were divided into the following sections: introduction, supporting intercultural communication, barriers of intercultural communication, differences between the roles in intercultural communication, preferences in intercultural communication and conclusion. However, interviews did not follow the exact interview guide but rather the logic of conversation. Thus, the interviewer had "a clear list of issues to be addressed and questions to be answered", but interviews were "flexible in terms of the order in which the topics" were discussed. The interviewee was encouraged to "speak more widely on the issues raised by the researcher" and to develop those ideas further (Denscombe, 2003, p.167) that enabled enhancing the richness of the responses and enriching the data. Thus, the interview topics were pre-specified in an interview guide, but were reworded as needed and covered by the researcher in any sequence or order according to the interview situation. Therefore, those interviews were

designed as explorations of the key actors perceptions and experiences of intercultural communication (Virkus, 2011).

Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method of data analysis was used for this research to provide a holistic picture of the contextual factors influencing the intercultural communication in the online learning of library and information science education. Glaser and Strauss (1967) called the constant comparative method of analysis whereby data is gathered and analyzed, and lead to the emergence of conceptual categories as the grounded theory (GT) approach.

Strauss (1987, p.5) notes:

The methodological trust of the grounded theory approach to qualitative data is toward the development of theory, without any particular commitment to specific kinds of data, lines of research, or theoretical interests. So, it is not really a specific method or technique. Rather, it is a style of doing qualitative analysis that includes a number of distinct features, such as theoretical sampling, and certain methodological guidelines, such as the making of constant comparison and the use of a coding paradigm, to ensure conceptual development and density.

The codes derived from analysis which consisted of analysis data line-by-line or phrase by phrase. Three types of coding were used: open (identifying, naming, categorizing and describing phenomena), axial (the process of relating codes to each other) and selective (choosing a core category and relating other categories to that) (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

3. Preliminary Findings

The majority of questions in the case study interviews aimed at gaining an understanding of interviewees' views, attitudes, beliefs and behaviour related to the intercultural communication. The constant comparative method of data analysis helped to generate an understanding of the main contextual factors of the intercultural communication. However, as the data analysis is still in progress, only very preliminary findings are presented here.

Four categories of factors emerged from the interviews which were important in online learning context: personal, cultural, pedagogical and technological factors.

Personal factors included similarities (e.g. age, educational background), personality traits (e.g. openness to experience, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism), intercultural competence, ability to adapt, and ability to support others.

Cultural factors included similarities and differences, cultural knowledge, beliefs, moral values, traditions, language, rules of behavior, religious observances, and customs.

Pedagogical factors included various educational approaches, complexity of the content, pedagogical soundness of the content, supported types of interaction, student support, methods supporting different learning styles, encouragement of participation, and provision of feedback.

Technological factors included the availability and access to information and communication technology, technological knowledge and skills, technological environment and its requirements, tools and technologies used, and ICT support and training.

We have to consider these factor when developing international online programmes in library and information science education.

4. Conclusions

A case study research strategy was used within a constructivist research paradigm to find out the factors which influence intercultural communication in library and information science education, and more specifically in online learning environment. Semi-structured interviews with two groups of students – students from the International Master in Digital Library Learning (DILL), and students from the Parma-Northumbria Joint Course, the International Master in Information Studies indicated that personal, cultural, pedagogical and technological factors were very important in international communication process. These factors should be considered carefully when developing international online programmes in library and information science education.

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