Intercultural education in practice: Two pedagogical experiences with mobile students

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Abstract

This pedagogical paper describes and discusses a teaching activity of intercultural education for mobile students developed within the European IEREST project (http://ierest-project.eu/). The activity is titled "24h Erasmus Life" and aims at making students reflect on four interrelated areas of their sojourn: the emotional impact of living abroad, the understanding of how communication works within a different academic community, the broader social dimension of the experiences, and the identity-related language issues. In Autumn 2014, the activity was tested with two different groups of students by teachers at the University of Bologna (UNIBO): the first group (A) was formed by 18 international incoming students and was taught by face-to-face teaching in Bologna; the second group (B) comprised 23 UNIBO students who were doing their study abroad in a variety of European countries, and participated in the activity by means of a Learning Management System. This paper traces the main instructional phases of "24h Erasmus Life", and comments on the students' learning experiences by reporting extracts from transcribed peer-to-peer class interactions (group A) and from class blog and forums (group B). Overall, the paper aims to describe how the teaching took place in the two cases considered.

Il presente articolo, di stampo pedagogico e operativo, descrive e commenta un'attività di educazione interculturale per studenti Erasmus sviluppata nel contesto del progetto europeo IEREST (http://ierest-project.eu/). L'attività "24 h Erasmus Life" mira a far riflettere gli studenti sul quattro aree tematiche: i possibili risvolti emotivi del percorso di mobilità, le differenze comunicative che caratterizzano ambienti accademici differenti, la dimensione sociale dell'esperienza all'estero, e i risvolti identitari dell'uso linguistico. Nell'autunno 2014, l'attività "24 h Erasmus Life" è stata sperimentata da alcuni insegnanti dell'Università di Bologna con due gruppi di studenti: il gruppo A, composto da 18 studenti internazionali, ha seguito l'attività in aula tramite lezioni faccia-a-faccia. Il gruppo B era formato da 23 studenti dell'Università di Bologna che, al momento dello svolgimento dell'attività, si trovavano in Erasmus; per questa ragione il gruppo B ha partecipato all'attività in modalità a distanza, tramite un *Learning Management System*. Il presente articolo ripercorre le fasi in cui si articola l'attività , si sofferma sulle esperienze degli studenti, e commenta alcuni estratti tratti dalle trascrizioni delle lezioni (gruppo A) e alcuni esempi tratti dai blog e dai forum dell'attività online (gruppo B). In generale, l'articolo intende mostrare come si è svolto l'insegnamento nei due casi considerati.

Keywords

1. Introduction

Students often self-report study abroad as a transforming experience (Jackson, 2008; Meier & Daniels, 2013). Though partially confirmed by studies (Brown, 2009; Tracy-Ventura et al., in press), these impressions say little about what real learning gains students achieved while abroad (Vande Berg et al., 2012). This is also true for intercultural learning, which is here conceptualised as an

integral part of personal development. Intercultural learning is the process through which individuals become aware of cultural complexity (that every person participates in different cultural groups and identify themselves with different - sometimes contrasting - identities) and are able to act upon such awareness. It has been repeatedly maintained that living abroad is not enough to enhance intercultural learning; students need educational support to turn first-hand experience into a potentially enriching intercultural experience (Byram & Zarate, 1995; Dervin, 2008).

This pedagogical paper describes and discusses a teaching activity for mobile students, specifically meant to help them reflect on the intercultural dimension of their sojourn. The activity, titled '24h Erasmus Life' (IEREST, 2015), aims at making students reflect on four interrelated topics: the emotional impact of living abroad, the awareness of how communication works within a different academic community, the broader social dimension of the experience, and identity-related language issues. The activity was originally developed within the context of the IEREST European project (http://ierest-project.eu), and then tested in a number of different universities within and outside Europe. Here I report on two of such pilotings, conducted at the University of Bologna with two different groups of students, one taught face-to-face and the other taught at a distance through a Learning Management System (LMS).

The purpose of this paper is to report on how '24h Erasmus Life' was concretely implemented in two different contexts, mostly for the benefit of teachers who may want to know how it works in practice. Thus, in what follows the reader will not find a detailed description of the activity, which is freely available in the IEREST manual (IEREST, 2015) and website (http://ierest-project.eu). Similarly, the paper does not attempt to compare face-to-face and online learning for what concerns the IEREST teaching practice. And, more importantly, it does not aim either at investingating to what extent intercultural learning occurred in the two pilotings, even if at specific points it highlights how the students' reactions can potentially be interpreted as markers of learning going on and thus may deserve further empirical investigation.

2. The IEREST project

The activity presented here was developed within IEREST (*Intercultural Education Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers*), a three-year European multilateral project (LLP 2012-2015) aimed at designing, testing, and disseminating an *Intercultural Path*, i.e. a set of teaching modules of intercultural education intended as an accompanying 'path' for Erasmus students on their way toward intercultural learning. The project produced ten teaching activities for different stages of mobility (pre-departure, while-abroad, and upon return). Learning objectives and outputs, contents and teaching procedures for such activities were established on the basis of the results obtained from preliminary research investigating the needs of the IEREST target groups (students, teachers, and higher education institutions) in respect of mobility and interculturality (Beaven, Borghetti, Van Maele & Vassilicos, 2013).

The theoretical approach of the *Intercultural Path* is non-essentialist (Holliday, 2011): students explore their own and others' multiple senses of belonging beyond that of national identity, which is usually the most immediately salient for them, precisely because of their international mobility (IEREST, 2015). Methodologically, this broad educational aim is pursued with a learning-by-doing approach, inspired by Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984): students are presented with authentic materials pertaining to the Erasmus world (e.g., student blogs, videos, brochures) and asked to engage in tasks by writing personal journals, interviewing other students, peer-to-peer teaching, etc. Theory is usually introduced at a later stage, in order to encourage critical reflection leading to of a final group assignment.

3. The activity '24h Erasmus Life'

'24h Erasmus Life' is one of the three activities intended to be taught when students are abroad (IEREST, 2015). It was designed to address a number of issues: the stress of coping with the new environment from an emotional point of view (which may also include loneliness and homesickness); the need to create a social network of new friends, and the difficulty to create bonds with local people; the feeling of excitement and/or frustration in dealing with a new academic system; and the impact of second language proficiency on self-confidence.

3.1 Learning objectives

Within the overarching goal of helping students understand and experience cultural differences in a non-essentialist way (Holliday, 2011), the activity pursues the following four learning objectives:

	Learning objectives This activity aims to enable students to:
1	Reflect on how communication in academic communities is shaped by differing histories, expectations and attitudes towards learning.
2	Explore and reflect on their emotional reactions (positive or negative) towards living abroad, going beyond easy attributions of their emotional states to cultural differences.
3	Develop curiosity towards and further knowledge about the new environment and the people who inhabit it.
4	Examine how using another language can affect one's self-image (and capacity to project an image) and feeling of belonging.

Table 1 '24h Erasmus life': learning objectives (IEREST, 2015, p. 59)

3.2 Theoretical underpinnings

This multifaceted activity is underpinned by several theoretical standpoints.

Regarding the emotional impact of living abroad, students are introduced to the concept of "culture shock" (Ward et al., 2001) and invited to critically appraise it in the light of their own experiences. Thus, they are asked to reflect on how it can be tempting and reassuring for

sojourners to unproblematically attribute feelings of discomfort to cultural differences, that is to external circumstances beyond the individual's power to change things (IEREST, 2015). The consequence is that alternative options - such as reflecting on one's own personal traits and resources - may be neglected.

It has been highlighted that mobile students often feel a sense of frustration at not having sufficient contacts with locals when abroad (Meier & Daniels, 2013; Mitchell, 2015) and that, in Europe, they tend to create "Erasmus cocoons" with other exchange students (Papatsiba, 2006). The activity thus invites reflection on why interactions with locals are considered important, including the mobile students' beliefs that language learning is more effective when one talks to native speakers. They are also guided to consider two possible consequences of this attitude: first, locals may resent the sojourners' instrumental interest in them, and thus be less keen to engage in a relationship; secondly, mobile students risk underestimating and consequently missing on the opportunities for language and intercultural learning offered by the Erasmus community itself (Borghetti & Beaven, 2015).

Becoming acquainted with a different academic environment can prove very challenging for mobile students. While language difficulties may play a major role in this, disappointment with the teaching is also common. In this activity, students analyse how their opinions may be rooted in assumptions (of what is 'good teaching', for example) they make on the basis of their educational background (Bogain, 2012).

Finally, students reflect on their identity-related language experiences. Expressing themselves in a second language can represent a main difficulty for students abroad. However, more than the challenges due to getting things done in the new environment, the problems are often due to the mismatch students feel between their perceived identities and the image of themselves they are able to project in the second language (Benson et al., 2012). As suggested by Pellegrino Aveni, "a paradoxical conflict results in that the language learner wishes to create and maintain an ideal sense of self in the second language, yet the very act of language use threatens that image" (2005, p. 4).

3.3 Instructional phases and teaching materials

'24h Erasmus life' is articulated in four main tasks, with the third task articulated in sub-tasks dedicated to each of the four thematic trends described above (see *Figure 1*).
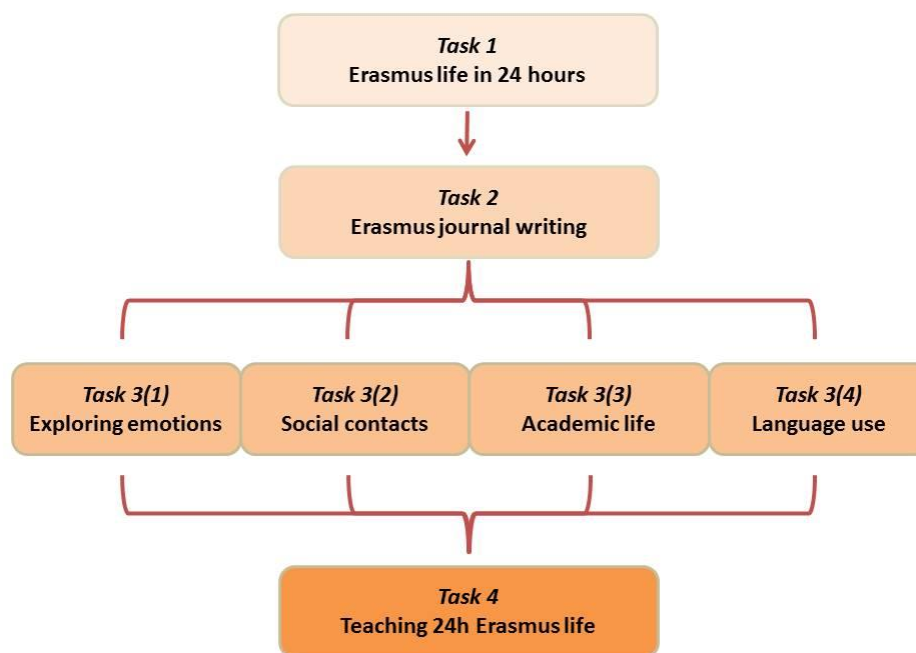
Figure 1 '24h Erasmus life': General structure of the activity (IEREST, 2015, p. 58)

The activity is named after the video *Erasmus Life in 24h*,[1] showed at the beginning of Task 1. Through a narrative expedient, the clip shows several different moments of Erasmus students' lives. This task aims at stimulating a class discussion on students' overall experiences abroad.

Task 2 introduces students to personal journal writing: throughout the activity, they are asked to keep a journal regularly and to share its entries with the teachers, in order for the latter to plan the following tasks with attention to the issues raised by the students themselves.

Accordingly, not all sub-tasks in Task 3 need to be completed; rather, teachers are encouraged to select only those sub-tasks which meet students' needs and interests. From a methodological point of view, each sub-task has the same structure: it begins with a class/group discussion of the journal entries, continues with the presentation/production of a second input to stimulate students' analysis and reflection, and end with an interactive lecture about the theoretical underpinnings of that specific task. What changes for each sub-task is the type of second input provided. Thus, students are asked to: analyse three web documents on emotional reactions to studying abroad (Task 3.1); critically appraise three lists of dos and don'ts about social relations abroad, written by former Erasmus students (Task 3.2); design of a survey on attitudes towards aspects of academic life abroad (Task 3.3); and draw a conceptual map which summaries class discussions about language and identity (Task 3.4).

Finally, in Task 4, students are asked, in small groups, to give a short lesson/presentation about the issues addressed during the activity for the benefit of other Erasmus students who have not taken part in the activity.

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[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRTtv60VTEE (Accessed 13/11/2015).

4. The teaching contexts

In the autumn of 2014, '24h Erasmus life' was tested with two different groups of students at the University of Bologna (UNIBO): the first group (A), formed of 18 international incoming students, was taught face-to-face in Bologna; the second (B), comprising 23 UNIBO students studying abroad in various European countries, were taught at a distance by means of an LMS.

The pilotings aimed at testing the overall quality of the activity, as well as collecting feedback though participant students' post-class questionnaires, teacher narratives, and, in the case of the face-to-face teaching, also the opinions of two experts who made class observations.

This non-compulsory course enabled students to obtain 3 ECTS for completing at least 70% of the course: this was measured in terms of participation and general commitment, such as the out-of-class writing of their personal journals.

4.1 Group A: Face-to-face teaching to incoming students

Students in group A met face-to-face with two IEREST teachers once a week (3.5 hours) for 6 weeks. They (12 females and 7 males) came from 12 countries: Australia, China, Colombia, Germany, Iran, Ireland, Moldova, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, and the UK. 15 were Erasmus students, while 4 were full-degree international students. Their field of studies included Medicine, Arts, Humanities, Foreign Languages and Economics.

Group A completed the entire activity (including all sub-tasks in Task 3). Teaching methodologies did not diverge substantially from the plan described above, except for two adaptations: first, teachers introduced additional materials (e.g., further written testimonials from Erasmus students on academic life), in order to offer students wider opportunities for reflection. Secondly, they integrated some language objectives in the activity, by focussing on the students' second language, Italian, and dedicated some time every week to giving feedback on journal entries from a linguistic point of view.

A challenging issue for this piloting was the language(s) of instruction, since some students mastered neither Italian nor English. Both languages were thus used in class, with students occasionally needing extra language support (e.g., reformulations and peers translation) to participate in class discussions.

4.2 Group B: Online teaching to outgoing students

Group B worked online for seven weeks, through the LMS *Canvas*. They (18 females and 5 males) were all enrolled at the University of Bologna and were spending a semester abroad through the Erasmus Programme. Their destinations were varied (e.g., Amsterdam, Barcelona, Oslo, Portsmouth, Rennes, Tallinn, Vienna), as was their educational background (for example, Economics, Education, Engineering, Languages, Political Sciences, Pharmacy). With the exception of three students, the majority had Italian as a main language.

The LMS offers a set of communication tools: a noticeboard where assignments were published twice a week, forums, web conferencing, theoretical video-lectures, and a class blog.

The class completed the entire '24h Erasmus life' activity, but several tasks needed to be adapted to an e-learning context:

- Personal journals were replaced with the class blog, were students were asked to write three posts overall. Moreover, they were also required to answer to at least three students' posts. Assignments on blog posts were organised as follows: while the first post could address any topic, the following two had to focus respectively on social contacts (Task 3.2) and language (Task 3.4).

- Two web-conferences and several video-recorded lectures were employed for interactive lecturing;

- Group work in separate forums was limited to Task 3.3; for the remaining tasks, this was done through the forums and the comments published under each blog post;

- The conceptual map (Task 3.4) was excluded from the teaching plan, as the technical difficulties of drawing online and sharing the result with others may have affected students' motivation and learning;

- The final lecture in Task 4 was replaced with individual video-clips, through which students gave short presentations.

The teaching materials were generally not translated into Italian. Similarly, the two teachers decided to use mainly English as the language of instruction, even though they let students choose what language to use. Although using Italian would have been the easiest option for most participants, many blog posts and comments were either written entirely in English or showed instances of code-switching and code-mixing.

5. Implementation

In what follows I focus on the students' experiences of Tasks 1, 3.1 and 3.3 in both groups. Extracts from transcribed peer-to-peer class interactions (for group A) and from the class blog and forums (group B) are discussed. While other types of data were available (e.g., journal entries for students in group A), the selection was dictated by the article space constraints, and by the decision to concentrate on data in which the teachers were present but silent, allowing the students to interact and thus fostering peer-to-peer scaffolding.

5.1 Erasmus Life in 24 hours (Task 1)

The video *Erasmus Life in 24 hours* was shown at the beginning of the activity as an icebreaker. Students were invited to critically appraise it in the light of their experiences: what aspects of Erasmus life were left out or, on the contrary, emphasized? What role did the music and the lack of dialogue have in creating the intended meaning? In both courses this task stimulated a wide

range of reactions. Most students identified strengths and weaknesses in the video, as shown in extracts 1 and 2.

> **Extract 1. Group B. Forum (English translation)**
> Watching the video, I can't but think about what I've been experiencing here, since I left (Italy) […]

> **Extract 2. Group B. Forum (English)**
> […] when I first watched the video it seemed to me a good (yet romantic) depiction of the Erasmus life. However, the more I advance in my Erasmus experience, the more I notice that University has a very strong place in it. Maybe in four years I will be thinking back on this experience as a 'whole', and not in parts, and it is very likely that I will remember the most about my friends, the people and moments spent together. However, in my daily life here, the fact of getting used to new learning methods, new types of assessments and developing academically speaking in a new language plays a crucial role. […]

The task encouraged the students to share their experiences (see Extract 1) and critically appraise the representation of study abroad shown in the video. Extract 2 is particularly telling in this respect: the student identifies the clip as a "depiction" of reality, which she defines "romantic". She also seems to interpret the discrepancy between her actual experiences and the contents of the video in terms of time perspective: the video focuses nostalgically on "friends, the people and moments spent together", because it looks backward; on the contrary, she is fully immersed in the new reality of the moment, thus she can only see her experience as split into its components. In addition, the student's explicit mention of university as her main academic concern offers teachers a valuable input for Task 3.3.

5.2 Exploring emotions (Task 3.1)

To introduce the task about the emotions of living abroad, the group B teachers asked students to go back to their own and others' blog posts and identify positive or negative emotional reactions and feelings. Despite students not having been asked to focus on the emotions of living abroad when writing their initial posts, the following extracts show that they spontaneously did so:

> **Extract 3. Group B. Blog (English).**
> At the beginning I was depressed by the fact that the language limited my social interactions: in Italy I love to chat and introduce myself as a sociable person, while here I was initially very shy, I weighed every word for the fear that someone could misunderstand the meaning. When someone asked me how my day was I couldn't express myself as some of my roommates who is always so good, but I only answered 'it has been ok!'; not to mention the fact that in class I appeared always the most silent and I didn't ask the professors for explanations which I usually ask in my Italian university (for fear of appearing 'silly' with my bad English).

> **Extract 4. Group B. Blog (English translation).**
> […] I spend my days in apathy/agony. I'm depressed, because I'm scared I won't pass my exams (I'm more and more certain of this). I attend classes which are too difficult, it seems to me that everybody

speaks a language I don't understand, that everybody is better than me […]. I live segregated in my own world, made of study, music and self-pity.

Past (Extract 3) and present (Extract 4) emotions are at the core of the two posts. But the affective sphere seems to be strictly interrelated with other dimensions of living abroad, especially with language difficulties and their impact on social participation ("language limited my social interactions", "it seems to me that everybody speaks a language I don't understand"). Language also influences academic life ("in class I appeared always the most silent", "I attend classes which are too difficult") and, more generally, constrains the students' sense of who they are ("in Italy I love to chat and introduce myself as a sociable person, while here I was initially very shy"; "everybody is better than me"). Considering the thematic richness of texts like these, it was relatively easy for teachers to link the theoretical insights and following tasks (about social contacts, academic life and languages) to the students' own words and thoughts.

Incidentally, it is worth mentioning that the author of Extract 4 found in her peers (people she had never met) a potential source of support. Below her post are four comments written by different participants. Here I report extracts from two of them:

Extract 5. Group B. Blog comment (English translation).
[…] I have found different ways to socialise with people… In class I jump in and start conversations with coursemates I don't know, at times it works, other times it doesn't, I have found a Tandem (it's a good opportunity to improve your English), I started doing sport and taking part in loads of cultural events in Vienna! Hope sooner or later something changes for you, don't give up!

Extract 6. Group B. Blog comment (English translation).
[…] If you stay in your room alone with your music, all you'll get is more depressed and perhaps the others will think that you want to be on your own. We are just half-way into our stay, you still have time to turn things round… because this also depends on us.

5.3 Academic life (Task 3.3)

As part of task 3.3, students in both courses were asked to read their own or others' past blog/journal before class in order to identify references to academic life abroad. They then had to use such these as starting points to design a student questionnaire to be submitted to as many as possible of their friends in higher education (no matter if mobile students, friends at home, locals, etc.). The aim of the questionnaire was to investigate on how respondents saw academic life in their host and/or home universities. In groups, students wrote 3-4 questions each, asking the respondents to indicate how much they agreed on specific statements about academic life (e.g., "it's important that the university system offers practical work in courses") using a Likert scale from 1 (=not at all) to 5 (=very much). Then, the students from each group administered their survey to their contacts through *SurveyMonkey*. Overall they received 82 (group A) and 62 (group B) responses. However, the goal of this task was more in the design of the survey than in their analysis of the collected answers (which nevertheless proved to be extremely motivating for

students); by reflecting in groups of what questions may be worth asking, they were able to discuss in groups the issues addressed.

The task offered the opportunity to reflect on preferences/familiarity with oral vs written exams, lectures vs groupwork activities, compulsory attendance, workload, etc. In the sequence below, taken from class interaction in group A, students discuss whether it is acceptable to eat in class.

Extract 7. Group A. Class interaction (English translation).

1   A. […] my course… from 11am till 7pm. No break, so we have to eat [laughter]
2   B. Really no break, you don't have a break? That's not possible, how [can-]
3   C.   [I have]this too
4   B. How can it be that you don't have a break?
5   A. A break means 5 minutes, we have 5 minutes
6   B. And in these 5 minutes (.) you don't have the chance to go out, to eat something?
7   A. No: 5 minutes, come on! We can't
8   […]
9   C. There are professors who allow us to eat during classes
10 B. Er: but professors never eat in class, I mean:
11 A. Professors [no]
12 C.   [No] no, but it's them who don't like us to eat in [class]
13 B.   [Er]
14 D. Ok, but that's fair enough, everyone has their own opinion, but now we need to write questions, we shouldn't discuss this
15 C. Yes, we have to have these discussions (.) because we ar-
[…]
16 B. The main problem is breaks. […] If you look at the Italian students' timetable, maybe they have a class from 9am to 11am and then another one from 2pm to 4pm. In my country this is forbidden, all classes must be one after the other, and this is the difference with many countries
17 C. Right
18 B. We can ask a question about this then
19 C. But we have [this-]
20 E.   […] for example, how many students are there in your university? (.) Here are there are many students
21 C. This is a huge university with many, many students
22 B. However it depends on the Department, for example in Low? °See? I can't say this.° How do you say it?
23 D. Law
24 B. They have four of five hours, always in a row and it depends on the organisation of the Department
25 C. It depends on individual Departments, is that what you mean? But, guys: we now need to ask different questions, otherwise we're always asking the same things […]

The extract shows that the issue was addressed from different perspectives. As expected, students had the chance to learn about and compare each other's habits and timetables, and more importantly to explore the reasons for them, e.g., the absence/presence of breaks between classes (lines 1-7 and 16). A normative approach to this matter is thus interactively avoided, and the

sequence is mostly dedicated to exploration, thanks to the contribution of all. For example, the lack of breaks is linked to university size (lines 20-21) and to the consequent impossibility of designing class timetables which can respond to the needs of all the students. Moreover, without denying the role of general rules, at different moments the point is made that the acceptability of a behaviour ultimately depends on the individual department (lines 22-25) and lecturer (lines 9-12). To conclude, the assigned task (whose frame is apparent in turns 14-15, 18, and 25) offered students opportunities to learn, and the student generally do this through non-essentialist reflections. These interactions also offered teachers opportunities to guide the group to analyse – adopting a comparable critical approach - other dimensions of difference besides the academic one, namely: what is expected from a doctor in different cultural contexts, and to what extent the academic institution plays a role on the quantity and quality of contacts with local students.

6. Final reflections

This short pedagogical paper describes how the IEREST activity '24h Erasmus Life' (IEREST, 2015) was implemented in two different but comparable pilot courses (one face-to-face, the other through distance learning). It does so by commenting on students' own contributions during peer-to peer class interaction, blog posts and forum entries. While space constraints have made it impossible to offer a larger sample of examples, the reported extracts show that the activity was quite effective in fostering students' participation and critical personal reflection on the issues addressed. On the contrary, given the descriptive purpose of this pedagogical paper, no claims can be made about the students' actual learning, i.e. to what extent intercultural learning occurred and what features of the activity were responsible for that. Further research is needed to shed light on that. Similarly, it is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate the comparative effectiveness of the two courses, which should certainly be done in order for example to investigate the relative impact of face-to-face/online communication on the teaching processes.

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