

**LEARNING THROUGH SHARING :
OPEN RESOURCES, OPEN PRACTICES, OPEN COMMUNICATION**

Open Intercultural Dialogue and 'Diplomacy': educator and student perspectives

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"If you haven't fought with each other you do not know each other"
Chinese proverb

Abstract

According to the Council of Europe, intercultural dialogue is “a process that comprises an *open* and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. It requires the freedom and ability to express oneself, as well as the willingness and capacity to listen to the views of others.” (Council of Europe 2008, p.17)

Whilst much has been written in the last few years about the power of Internet and social networks in bringing people together, particularly when organizing protests and rallying support for causes, as many have pointed out (Yardi & boyd, 2010) on Internet people associate with other groups of people who are in many ways like themselves or who share a common cause. When on the other hand Internet and social networks are used by members of different ethnic, cultural or religious backgrounds for the discussion of intercultural issues there is little evidence of people exchanging views with mutual understanding and respect. The comments posted to public discussion forums related to news or videos on issues such as migration or religious tolerance can be so offensive that educators are (understandably) reluctant to even provide students with links to these ‘open resources’ for fear that their eyes fall on un-moderated comments, let alone encourage them to become active members of such online communities as has been recommended by some (eg. Hanna and de Nooy 2009). Online intercultural exchanges set up between institutions can be seen to provide a safe environment for a respectful exchange of views, yet in designing these exchanges educators may choose to avoid ‘sensitive’ topics such as religion, politics, sexuality for fear of misunderstandings arising and the exchange ‘failing’. This is in line with some sociocultural competence models which suggest strategies such as “[u]sing diplomacy for the purpose of maintaining a dialogue of cultures in the spirit of peace and mutual understanding; redirecting a discussion to a more neutral topic; dissimulate[ing] personal views to avoid potential conflict” (Savignon and Sysoyev 2002 p. 513).

In this paper we explore educators’ and students’ perspectives on open dialogue on 'sensitive' topics in online intercultural exchanges. We combine quantitative data from a survey of over 100 language educators and students across Europe with qualitative data from interviews.

Council of Europe (2008) White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue “Living Together As Equals in Dignity”.

Hanna, B. and De Nooy, J. (2009) Language and Culture Via Public Internet Discussion Forums. Palgrave Macmillan.

Savignon, S. J. and Sysoyev, P. V. (2002), Sociocultural Strategies for a Dialogue of Cultures. The Modern Language Journal, 86: 508–524.

Yardi, S. & boyd, D. (2010). Dynamic Debates: An Analysis of Group Polarization Over Time on Twitter. *Bulletin of Science Technology Society*, 30(5), 316-327.