How to foster intercultural competencies by digital media in educational context – is it possible, realistic, and effective?

Mag.[a] Sophie Lenz, FHWien University of Applied Sciences, Competence Centre E-learning
sophie.lenz@fh-wien.ac.at

Mag.[a] Barbara Covarrubias Venegas, FHWien University of Applied Sciences, Institute for Human Resources and Organisation
barbara.covarrubias@fh-wien.ac.at

Abstract

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For universities being international is of utmost importance for high ranking positions as well as for multinational companies expatriation programmes are crucial to their competitiveness. Sending students abroad is a vital means to show international networking. However, when dealing with the intercultural competence of outgoing students/expatriates we have to admit that they often feel unprepared and left alone in the foreign culture.

For universities, digital/blended learning offers interesting possibilities in the field of intercultural trainings, considering the decrease of training costs and failure rates because of a lack of intercultural communication competence. State of the art literature shows how companies apply with digital media to foster intercultural competencies, while less research is done in the context of universities and their outgoing students. The authors proposed within another research activity a conjoint project to implement a blended learning training to partner universities and were surprised of the high response rate from all over the world. This confirms the strong need of further data and research in this field.

This paper gives an overview of possibilities of how to apply digital learning for preparing them for the student exchange. To get an insight in the needs of outgoing students, standardized qualitative interviews with students of the FHWien University of Applied Sciences WKW were used.

About the authors:

Sophie Lenz *is a research associate at the Competence Center E-Learning at FHWien University of Applied Sciences in Vienna where she develops and implements e-learning strategies and training programs for students and lecturers. She studied and worked in Austria, Hungary, France and the Netherlands, graduated in humanities (main areas of interest: computer linguistics, foreign language acquisition and text linguistics) and is currently following a Bachelor-program for Business Informatics.*
Contact: sophie.lenz@fh-wien.ac.at

Barbara Covarrubias Venegas *is a research associate and lecturer at the Institute for Human Resource and Organisation at the FHWien University of Applied Sciences.*
Since 2011 Barbara Covarrubias is a PhD candidate at the Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt/Austria. Her research focuses on the learning organisation and age diversity within institutions. Barbara Covarrubias is vice president of SIETAR Austria (Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research). Her major research interests are age diversity, intercultural management, international Human Resource Management and Human Resource Performance Measurment.
Contact: barbara.covarrubias@fh-wien.ac.at

1. Introduction

In this paper the authors aim to discuss the growing need of intercultural competence for universities as well as companies. Due to economic crisis many institutions face the problem of how to cut costs without damaging their long-term prospects. Training budgets are easy targets, which means trainings budgets, including intercultural trainings are being cut. E-learning courses are a possibility to face these challenges. We emphasis to give an introduction on how intercultural competence might be fostered by digital media.

In this article we highlight the following two groups, which we define as follows:

– **Student sojourners (outgoing students)** are those who travel abroad to study and return to their home country as students to continue their study program.
– **Professional sojourners (expatriates)** are those who travel for professional reasons and return to a professional environment. (Martin and Harrell: 308)

There is still very little distinction in the literature between these two groups, although their concerns and motivations might be completely different (Martin and Harrell: 308), hence the authors conducted qualitative interviews with student of the FHWien University of Applied Sciences WKW who spent a semester abroad.

We consider as well a growing need of intercultural education, but not only because of internationalisation of institutions. As in Austria immigration increased steadily since 2000 from about 80,000 to about 115,000 immigrants in 2010. Although about 2/3 of the immigration comes from the European Union, which is a geographically close area, there are still big cultural differences. These are challenges which organisations and universities have to face.

2. About the importance of Intercultural Competence for Universities

In the following chapter we outline the importance of Intercultural Competence for universities.

Student sojourners (outgoing students) are those who travel abroad to study and return to their home country as students to continue their study program. (Martin and Harrell: 308) One part of a wider suite of internationalization strategies are international student exchange programmes. They are considered to increase students´ intercultural awareness and competence. All educational programs that take place outside the geographical borders of the country of origin are considered as study abroad programs. These programs have gradually gained popularity and interest in the last ten years. Attracting highly skilled workers through policies related to student mobility programs also has an effect on labour market mobility.

There are several possibilities of exchange programs between universities. Students can stay abroad for a single semester or year, but they can also take part in fully cohesive programs where they complete an entire degree at an institution outside their home country. (Cushner and Karim: 290) Several universities design so called "joint study programs" where students complete a study degree at different universities, staying i.e. for one semester at a specific institution. Numerous universities design so called "joint study programs" where students complete a study degree at different universities, staying normally for one semester at a specific institution.

Exchange programs transfer a lot of experiences to host as well as home country students. First of all there should be mentioned the increased awareness of language, independently if communication takes place in "English" or any other language. Other advantages are international friendships which lead to personal development. (Rebecca P. Cheney 2001: 98–99) Students from different countries, who speak various languages and bring with them different cultural backgrounds request broader awareness by lecturers and students. Therefore the promotion of students´ (as well lecturers`) intercultural competence is getting more significant. (Adalbjarnardottir and Runarsdottir 2006: 177)

It is probable that several university students will end up in foreign projects, do extensive international travel, or need to be sensitive to the challenges of those who are in these roles. This necessitates familiarizing with new environments where the customs, rules, and ways of thinking differ from one's own. Adapting to such a foreign environment requires more than just an

intellectual understanding of the cultural differences. It involves the ability to demonstrate an understanding of the behavioural differences as well.

Studying abroad gives students the opportunity to immerse in another culture and they often return with a broad understanding of traditions, behaviours, art and business models. This experience allows them to be more effective and innovative in their working lives and more satisfied on a personal level. Therefore universities, who set the goal of internationalization and improvement of intercultural competence of their students, need to recognize that this is an on-going process and not an immediate result of one experience. Intercultural competence needs to be defined and assessed throughout time. (Deardorff 2006: 248–259)

3.   Intercultural Competence

As we demonstrated in the former chapter there is a growing need of intercultural communication skills and consequently there is increasing need of companies to have people who can deal effectively with other people from different cultural backgrounds on the one hand; as well as universities on the other hand have the responsibility to educate students to be sensitive with different cultures. In organisations or universities that have a high degree of cultural diversity, it is much more difficult to collaborate successfully. This is mainly due to the fact that cross-cultural interactions provoke very easily misunderstandings and conflicts. The understanding of different patterns of behaviour and attitudes help in consequence to match their own actions to the specific needs and expectations. This ability can be described as cultural competence. (Podsiadlowski 2004: 45–46)

Deardorff describes some requisite attitudes as respect (valuing other cultures), openness to intercultural learning and curiosity to discover as necessary to develop intercultural competence. Through the acquisition of knowledge i.e. culture-specific information and comprehension, i.e. cultural self-awareness and deep understanding of contexts, role and impact of culture & others´ world view, the external outcome, describes as "behaving and communication effectively and appropriately to achieve one´s goals to some degree", will be higher. Deardorff also emphasizes skills for acquiring and processing knowledge about other cultures as well as one's own culture and attitude. (Deardorff 2006: 254)

The development of intercultural competence is usually done by means of special training. (Graf and Mertesacker 2009: 539) A typology of intercultural trainings is described in the subsequent chapter.

4.   Typology of Intercultural Trainings

Cross-cultural trainings have the task to promote and support cross-cultural learning and intercultural competence development to prepare for further intercultural cooperation. (Podsiadlowski 2004: 133–134)

In this chapter we use a typology of intercultural training designs according to Graf and Mertesacker presented by figure 1 and explain the several dimensions.

Figure 1: Typology of intercultural training designs
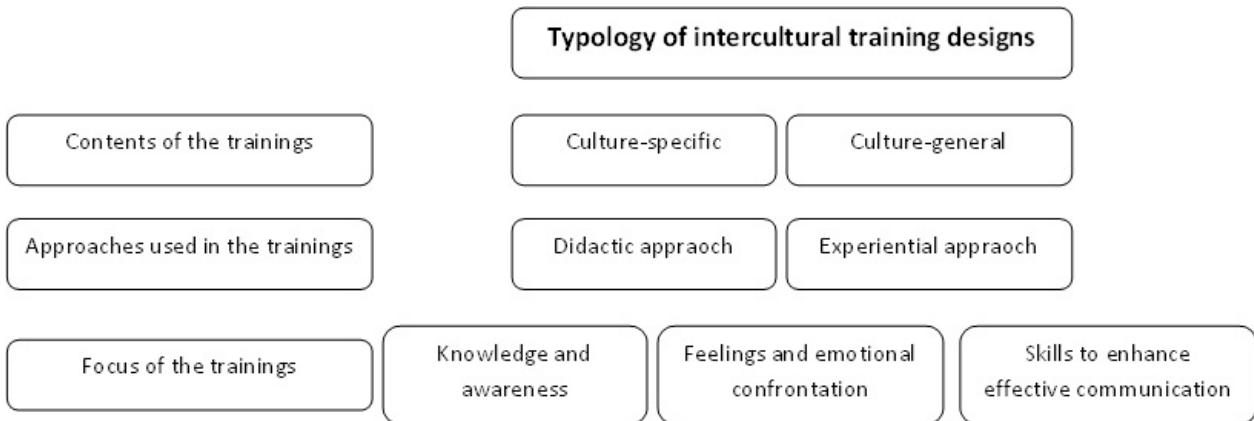
Source: Graf and Mertesacker 2009: 540

Culture-general trainings provide cultural awareness. The objective of this training is "self-awareness" and/or "cultural awareness". Among other culture-general trainings focus on the influence of culture on our own actions and on the actions of others. (Podsiadlowski 2004: 134)

Culture-specific trainings provide knowledge, focusing specifically on individual cultures thus to facilitate cooperation among employees. It will impart knowledge about one's own and others' cultural norms and cultural dimensions. Furthermore, these trainings provide guidance and strategies to facilitate interaction with members of other cultures. Culture-specific trainings include information in geography and culture, verbal and nonverbal communication, codes of conduct, problem-solving strategies, team work and negotiation. (Podsiadlowski 2004: 134)

The **didactic approach** regarding culture-general trainings is used to present culture-general information. Typical techniques and methods used within this approach are i.e. lecture/discussion, videotapes and culture-general assimilators. By contrast, didactic culture-specific methods focus on culture-

specific information and may be for example orientation briefings, language trainings, culture-specific assimilators and culture-specific readings. (Fowler and Blohm 2010: 39-40)

Experiential approaches of intercultural training designs involve much more the trainees. The experiential culture-specific approach includes the interaction with members of other cultures and provides the opportunity to learn from these experiences through bicultural intercultural workshops, culture-specific simulations and culture-specific role plays. (Fowler and Blohm 2010: 39-40)

Effective intercultural trainings incorporate elements of didactic and experiential trainings.

Chapter 6 evaluates the possibilities how digital media can support intercultural training designs to foster intercultural competence.

5.　　　Qualitative Approach

The authors chose to undertake qualitative research methods, as qualitative research allows - in a first step - to understand the subject's opinion and to expose the meaning of their experiences and get deeper insights. In comparison to quantitative methods, the qualitative approach is considered to be more open and flexible.

The following research questions leaded the development of the questionnaire:

- What were the problems that exchange students accounted in the foreign country (personal, social and professional experiences)?
- How did the students feel prepared for the intercultural experience?
- What might be possible conclusions for an e-learning system, regarding their experiences?

As we followed an exploratory approach, we used qualitative interviews to gather further data. The interviews were based on a rough thematic guideline so i.e. the order of the questions is flexible. Although the qualitative interview method doesn´t lead to objective information, we could capture many of the subject's views on the topic. In July 2010 five students from the FHWien University of Applied Sciences of WKW were interviewed. All of them spent one semester at a partner university within the academic year 2010/2011.

The interview guideline was divided in five topic areas. It was about the student´s experiences (personal, social and professional), their needs for intercultural preparation and what expectations they have regarding digital media for preparing them with intercultural competence.

- Personal Aspects
- Social Aspects
- Professional Aspects
- Implications for digital learning programs

Exchange students and their intercultural experience

Even though the interviews that have been conducted with outgoing students of the FHWien University of Applied Sciences of WKW after their return

cannot be considered as representative, some of the most interesting deductions can be summarized as the following:

- Students didn't report to have received any organised training before going abroad or during their stay abroad. Neither they were aware of colleagues from other universities of having participated in such trainings before leaving to the host university.
- In general, they didn't make specific efforts to prepare themselves for the host culture through reading, consuming other media, getting in touch with people from their host culture before leaving.
- When asking them about "intercultural experiences", many answers appeared as "blind prejudices" – recounting mainly differences in every-day-experiences from a rather subjective point of view than giving explanations or assumptions for/about the witnessed incidents. This result is also limited as we didn´t interview students who came back earlier as planned.
- The International Office of the FHWien University of Applied Sciences of WKW established Facebook-Groups of former outgoing students which were frequently used by some of the interviewed students. Most of the reports were quite positive, altogether, though. A direct deduction of the urgent need for better preparation wouldn't be precipitous. This might also be explained by the personal characteristics of the interviewed students as well as the length of stay (not more than a semester).

6. Intercultural competence through digital media

6.1. Definition of E-Learning

We refer to the use of all types of digital media for training purposes by the term „e-learning". In accordance with Meissonier's study about a distance learning course for exchange students, e-learning mainly consists of online (web-based) training, and offline learning (CD-ROMs, videotapes, DVDs etc.) is practically omitted. (Meissonier et al 2006: 3)

A clear distinction between e-learning and blended learning is not necessary in this context, since we do not aim at a complete course design (that might or might not consist of a combination of distance-learning and presence-learning). Our focus lies on an analysis of typical e-learning-features and the underlying question how these features qualify e-learning as a method for intercultural training.

6.2. Learning management systems in higher education

It is important to point out that universities that engage in student exchange programs usually already dispose of a certain infrastructure to enable e-learning-features and that elements of e-learning are established in the institution. In other words, operationalizing such an existing learning management system for intercultural training purposes does not require new technical implementations, and it can be assumed that students and staff are familiar with the applications. Therefore, we will base our analysis on the concept of such a „typical" learning management system and its most common functionalities such as file-sharing (users can upload materials and allow other users to download and/or print those materials), communication tools (e.g. forums, chat, instant messaging), (self-)assessment tools (e.g. quizzes, online-tests), feedback (ways to grade and/or comment on content created by others) and tools to generate texts and knowledge together (such as wikis, publicly editable documents, databases etc.). The terms learning management system, e-learning system and e-learning environment are considered as synonyms.

6.3.   Characteristics of e-learning environments

Apart from those rather technical tools and functionalities described above, e-learning systems can be characterised by a number of very specific features. We would like to single out four of those features and put them into the context of intercultural training later on: independence from time and space, multimedia, interactivity and cooperation.

Being *independent from time and space* is presumably the most obvious starting point to consider e-learning as applicable in student exchange programs. (Meissonier et al 2006: 5) Learning situations can be organised where trainers and students are no longer required to be physically present at the same location – which corresponds to the typical situation of outgoing students that can be „reached" for training purposes during their sojourn abroad through the learning management system.

The *multimedia* character enables rather simple ways to present information through different channels (written texts, audio, video, graphic elements) and therefore makes e-learning applicable for different learning styles (Rey 2009: 15-29). Furthermore, learners can be confronted with a broad range of different aspects of a subject (e.g. a foreign culture) by combining texts, movies, authentic videos, pictures, maps, animations, music etc. on one platform.

Besides the convenient ways of providing content for learners, e-learning environments usually also dispose of *interactive tools* that involve learners and enable them to interfere with the material actively. (Rey 2009: 22) In the context of student exchange, that means that intercultural training can be organised in a way that motivates students to process their observations actively and trigger experiential learning.

Finally, the capacities of e-learning go beyond interaction between users and the system itself, but also enable interaction between several users by offering various tools for *communication, cooperation and collaboration* across locations and borders. Even here, the potential for the context of student exchange is obviously enormous: Contact with peer students and staff from the home institution as well as the host institution can be organised before, during and after the sojourn and facilitate administrative issues, but also help

outgoing students to process experiences through exchange with others and feedback. Another aspect is the fact that communication skills are generally considered as central dimension respectively outcome of intercultural training (Graf and Mertesacker 2009: 540). Through e-learning, situations that require intercultural communication can be simulated and analysed, but also embedded in authentic context.

6.4. How can e-learning support different types of intercultural trainings?

Those characteristic features of e-learning have significant implications for the design of intercultural training programs. We would like to go into more details regarding these implications for the different types of intercultural training as described in chapter 4 by aligning each type with the four features independence from time and space, multimedia, interactivity and cooperation.

6.4.1. Culture-specific trainings / Didactic approach

A didactic approach for culture-specific trainings generally provides information about a specific culture and is „based on the assumption that a cognitive understanding of a culture, its people and customs is necessary to effectively interact with people of that culture". That information can be distributed and organised efficiently on an e-learning platform and accessed by students, regardless of their current location. It is not necessary that students receive all information materials before their departure, but they can be provided with up-to-date material easily during their sojourn. By taking advantage of the multimedia potential of the e-learning platform, students can be confronted with all various aspects of the specific culture: Literature and newspaper articles about / from the host country can be provided as text documents. Websites ran by tourist information, host university, governmental institutions etc. can be connected through simple hyperlinking techniques. Pictures of the university / town / country can help students visualise their new environment and can also be used to point out specific cultural information such as characteristic gestures. Music and audio documents can be integrated as audio files. Films and clips from movies can be accessed via links to an internet-source (e.g. YouTube). It is important to point out that documentaries as well as certain entertainment movies that take

place in a certain culture are applicable for intercultural trainings. A few examples for movies that are traditionally used to teach about specific cultures are given by Fowler and Blohm (2010: 53).

Finally, the interactive component of learning environment systems and the low-level tools for cooperation makes it possible that such information material is not only provided by the intercultural trainer, but also by the students themselves. A possible scenario could be a database or a wiki where outgoing students can collect and share interesting information and material about their host culture, country and / or university during and after their sojourn that they consider useful for future exchange students at the specific destination.

6.4.2. Culture-specific trainings / Experiential approach

Student exchange itself is an example for immersion as described by Fowler and Blohm and therefore an experiential method for intercultural training. (Fowler and Bloh 2010: 73-75) E-learning systems can be operationalized to help students to process the experience they gain during their sojourn and generate culture-specific knowledge and competence from that. Reflection and exchange about experiences can be considered as crucial moments in that process – both can be organised easily through digital media in many ways: Students can describe their experiences with the host culture in a blog and share them with trainers, fellow students and also friends and family at home. Forums and / or chat-sessions are alternatives to tell people about experiences and receive (more or less) immediate feedback.

Besides immersion as experiential method by definition, other experiential methods can be realised with the support of e-learning elements during a structured intercultural training: Intercultural workshops can be organised and even held online (e.g. supported by web conferencing tools), where members of the host culture, such as peer students from the receiving university can be involved directly. Intercultural simulations can be integrated in the learning platform – multimedia elements (videos, music etc.) play an important role for the development of such simulations.

Finally, due to the low-level communication tools, it needs to be pointed out that each piece of information that is presented in alignment with the didactic approach can be combined with experiential methods since it is possible to

organise discussions, commenting mechanisms and question-and-answer-sessions about the content online.

6.4.3. Culture-general trainings / Didactic approach

Even though outgoing students are always immersing into a specific culture (the one of their host country), we must not forget that student exchange programs also dispose of a strong culture-general aspect. Cushner and Karim refer implicitly to the phenomenon that outgoing students often stick with their multicultural peer group instead of socializing with natives from the host culture. (Cushner and Karim 2010). It can be assumed that for many outgoing students, the sojourn is one of their first experiences in such a multicultural environment. A general awareness for cultural differences might not only help outgoing students to deal with that situation, but also help them to develop dimensions of intercultural competence such as sensitivity, open-mindedness and the ability to change their point of view (Graf and Mertesacker 2009: 542).

The principle of e-learning support for culture-general trainings through the didactic approach is similar to culture-specific training. A wide selection of information material around the subject of culture awareness can be provided online, various media can be integrated. Film material is particularly suitable to confront students with impressive situations where cultural awareness (respectively a lack of awareness) plays a role. Other significant methods that generate cultural awareness are case studies and critical incidents: A case study is an „account of a situation that includes enough details to assess the problems involved and determine possible solutions" whereas critical incidents are „brief descriptions of situations in which there is a problem […] or conflict arising from cultural differences". (Fowler and Blohm 2010: 57-58)

Case studies and critical incidents can both be made available on e-learning platforms (in a multimedia way, if applicable). Online quizzes seem to be a promising tool to confront learners with a number of cases / incidents and possible explanations or solutions. Examples of online quizzes that help learners to acquire cultural awareness can be found under http://www.ikkompetenz.thueringen.de/ca/index.htm (in German). The quizzes have a culture-specific character. However, they can be considered as models that can be adapted easily for more culture-general incidents.

6.4.4. Culture-general trainings / Experiential approach

The approaches described for culture-specific trainings seem applicable (with certain modifications) for culture-general contexts as well. It is not unlikely that the importance of culture-general competencies is more prominent during the sojourn (when students are confronted with their multicultural environment) than before their departure (when they might prefer to get prepared specifically for their host country). Therefore, the space-independent character of e-learning that provides ways to activate students from the distance is particularly valuable. For example, outgoing students could be motivated to reflect (and inherently increase) their cultural awareness by collecting incidents where they are confronted with misunderstandings in their daily life, and share it in a blog or a forum, where it can be discussed. A particularly interesting approach could be the following: Through the learning management system, students from the same home university that go to different host countries at the same time can stay in touch with each other and discuss their experiences / incidents with each other.

6.5.   Summary

The implications of the characteristic features of e-learning for various types of intercultural training that have been deducted in the previous chapters can be summarised as follows: