

## **Negotiating intercultural awareness in *MexCo*: agency, autonomy and troublesome knowledge in an international online project between the UK and Mexico**

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This paper reports on an international intercultural online learning project – *MexCo* - involving students and staff at Coventry University UK (Department of English and Languages), staff at the University of Warwick UK (Language Centre), staff and students at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras, Facultad de Estudios Superiores Zaragoza) and staff and students at *Universidad de Monterrey (UDEM - Mexico)*, *Dirección de Programas Internacionales*. The project received funding from the Higher Education Academy.

*MexCo* addresses the themes of internationalization, employability and digital literacy. It explores student-centred ways of embedding these themes into the Higher Education curriculum in order to foster the development of digitally proficient ‘global graduates’, able to recognise and value cultural difference.

At Coventry University the project was embedded into the syllabus and assessment of the compulsory module *Introduction to Studying English and Languages at University*. A dedicated Virtual Learning Environment area was created to enable students and staff to share knowledge via forum discussions and tailor-made intercultural activities. Social Media were also used to maximise communication. All year 1 students on the BA Honours degree courses in the Department of English and Languages were given the assessed task to create multimedia guides for their peers in Mexico, addressing their requests for information relating to aspects of British culture and society. These learning objects provide a fascinating insight into the perception of what constitutes ‘culture’ for undergraduate students in both the UK and Mexico.

Data collected demonstrate that the project has given its participants the opportunity “to confront and deal with the prejudices, stereotypes and myths that they hold about other social groups and cultures and that others may hold about them” (O’Dowd 2007: 29). Areas of troublesome knowledge in online-supported learning exchanges also emerged. The deconstruction of the linguistic exchanges in the VLE’s forum brought to the fore the ways in which language use reveals perceptions of power relationships amongst the agents involved.

Land, Meyer and Smith (2008: ix-xxi) suggest that the identification of threshold concepts allows tutors to put in place targeted curricular interventions aiming at supporting students’ learning experience and making ‘troublesome knowledge’ less troublesome. The research questions explored in the *MexCo* project in light of threshold concept pedagogy are the following:

- Is Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) a threshold concept?
- Does the engagement with digital multilingual multimodal multiliteracies help learners cross the transformative portal leading them to “making sense” of what ICC is?
- What troublesome cyberpragmatics (Yus Ramos 2011) knowledge do learners encounter in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) online international exchanges?

It is argued here that interculturality could be seen as a liminal space where the learners’ identity is negotiated and reconfigured. The journey into another culture and reality ends as a journey in the rediscovery of one’s own culture and reality and often in a healthy re-discussion of one’s intercultural frameworks. Online intercultural knowledge-sharing adds an extra layer of complexity

to the intercultural journey and new telecollaborative competences need to be taught to both staff and students.

### **References**

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