Editorial Preface

Special Issue on Intercultural Competence…
Again?

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Before writing this introduction, Fred found himself lamenting to a friend about having to write yet again about intercultural competence (Dervin & Gross, 2016). Is there anything new to be discussed and to add to the field? Hasn't everything already been said, every stone turned? Shouldn't we simply 'drop' this educational mantra, this somewhat poor excuse of a concept, which is often used "in the service of the struggle to acquire or maintain power" (Woolard, 1998, p. 7, see the work of the Council of Europe on the matter)? Fred's friend agreed with him and yet she argued that the 'fight' is not over and that we should strive to make it a meaningful and transformative concept. She had just witnessed a colleague begging for her institution to develop a new 'model' of intercultural competence. This colleague had never done any work on the 'intercultural', was unaware of the archaeology of the concept of intercultural competence but decided that it was an important one.

Intercultural competence has this *je ne sais quoi* quality about it (Jankélévitch, 1980, p. 11):

(it is) something whose invisible presence satisfies us and whose inexplicable absence leaves us strangely unsettled; something that does not exist and yet is the most important thing of all, the only one worth expressing, and yet precisely the only one that cannot be expressed.

Because of this quality, it has become both universal misunderstanding and a somewhat empty signifier. This second issue of the *International Journal of Bias, Identity and Diversities in Education* (IJIBIDE) wishes to contribute to questioning the concept of intercultural competence and to propose new ways of looking into it.

The notion of the *intercultural* and its avatars (multicultural, cross-cultural, etc.) has been researched in different fields: psychology, sociology, anthropology, communication, education, health care, management and so on (Dervin, 2011, 2016). It has become also increasingly trendy in language education following the work of the Council of European and the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL). The paucity of critical research about the concept in most fields is frightening in times like ours, where the 'other' has become our (imagined) enemy worldwide. At a recent conference in China, one of us reacted strongly to the fact

that a Chinese scholar was using uncritically a 'model' of Intercultural competence which has spread like a virus in global research. The scholar had clearly misunderstood the (Eurocentric) ideologies hiding behind this model and been indoctrinated into believing that the voice of the European guru he was referring to was the voice of Truth. The result? His research participants were being judged as 'good' or 'bad' intercultural speakers on the basis of a model 'from the (European) past'.

Of course, new horizons of research have emerged in the last three decades and contributed to making intercultural competence an important agenda in research, practice and policy-making (with the three often overlapping): China has become an unavoidable business partner for most countries of the world, call centers relocate to countries like India, staff from the health sector are crossing more borders to be employed overseas e.g. as nurses in Japan (from Indonesia and the Philippines) or doctors in France (from Romania), the number of international students of diverse origins and speaking a large array of languages is on the rise worldwide (Knight, 2012), etc.

Although the contexts might look 'new', the way intercultural competence is being dealt with has hardly changed over the past 20 years. Some people have tried to reshape the concept by 'inventing' new terms. As such, in a recent 'discussion' with a 'specialist' of the global international education sector on Twitter, who was arguing that the idea of global citizenship is more innovative than intercultural competence, Fred shared his disagreement saying that the word might sound new but it too easily falls back into the same trap as intercultural competence. The 'specialist' responded that "*'new' terms show development of practice and conversations*". We disagree vehemently. The problems that the idea of intercultural competence faces (*reinforced methodological nationalism, essentialism, culturalism, a lack of interest in intersectionality and power*, etc.) will not disappear by merely changing and marketing new terms. Like ointment, it can soothe for a while but not heal…

The editors and the contributors of this special issue do not believe that history is doomed to constantly repeat itself. We do not believe that individuals have to be inscribed in some form of static, solid (Bauman, 2001) representation of their culture, and that after they have adjusted to — let's call it conveniently that way — a Culture B, they would have to re-do the work when they are entering the environment of Culture C. In other words, we prefer to insist on what is happening during the process of *inter*culturation rather than counting on a sheer opposition between two space-time contexts in line with a Herderian, oppositionist approach of the 19th Century (Wimmer, 2013).

To our surprise, deconstructivist approaches developed in the last three decades and adopted by critical interculturalists such as Abdallah-Pretceille (2005), Shi-Xu (2014), Holliday (2011), Dervin (2011, 2013), or Machart and Lim (2013) to analyse intercultural interactions seem to be largely ignored by most research on intercultural competence today (exceptions can be found in Dervin & Gross, 2016). In almost all fields, scholars tend to hold onto old essentialising models (Dervin, 2011; Dervin & Machart, 2015), to overemphasize national/cultural difference, to ignore the importance of interaction in the construction of the 'intercultural'. These templates still inscribe individuals into a fixed identity. They may be easily-applicable and convenient for the private sector which is keen to sell ready-to-use trainings (e.g. Zotzman, 2015). In research too, scholars can easily align a series of research projects following the same patterns, but without questioning the concepts or the models they are using.

As a result, one can claim to be a specialist of 'intercultural interactions' with Russia, i.e. one has some form of encyclopaedic knowledge about the country, before switching to Japan, and later on to any other country. We do not believe that the life of research participants or individuals in schools, theatres, companies, homes, on the street can be found in any encyclopaedia, and that it is high time to move away from some form of memorisable, quantifiable knowledge to include a human dimension, a "humanism of the diverse" (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2005, 2012).

This second issue of IJIBIDE contains seven articles, among which five compose the special issue. The authors of these five articles point out assumptions and modes of thought and practice that need deconstructing and reconstructing.

In the first article, *Revisiting intercultural competence: Small culture formation on the go through threads of experience*, one of the most influential critical interculturalists, **Adrian Holliday**, explains why he believes that intercultural competence is something present in every person and that they should 'practise' it by transferring their experiences of everyday small culture formation and the politics that goes with it, to 'intercultural' contexts.

In *Reflections of own vs. other culture: considerations of the ICC model*, **Eiko Gyogi and Vivian Lee** critically engage with Michael Byram's model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) – a model that has acquired a cult following around the world. Recognising first the influence of the model on global research, the authors examine how Byram's emphasis on 'own' and 'other' cultures in relation to intercultural competence fails to highlight the fluidity of language learners in a Korean university and to position them in an *us vs. other* dyad.

Susan Oguro and **Angela Giovanangeli** propose to use the notion of 'cultural responsiveness' to interpret and categorize intercultural experiences during study abroad from Australia. This results in three parameters: Awareness, Engagement and Bringing Knowledge Home.

The next article also deals with study abroad, this time from Malaysia to France. The emphasis is on preparation prior to departure, during which the students are taught how to deconstruct cultural stereotypes. Relying on a critical approach to intercultural competence, **Regis Machart** and **Atafia Azzouz** used questionnaires and reports written after a lecture on intercultural encounters to show the potential impact on the students' representations of France and the French. Like the previous article, the authors show that critical and reflexive preparation can have some positive influence on study abroad experiences.

Michael Jeive closes the special issue with *Negotiating beyond an essentialised culture model: the use and abuse of cultural distance models in international management studies.* In the article the author also proposes an alternative way of dealing with intercultural competence by focusing on specific communication instances that move away from a national culture distance dominated approach.

The second issue of IJIBIDE also contains two articles related to diversities in basic education (Canada) and higher education (Australia).

In *EAL in Public Schools in British Columbia: Reconsidering Policies and Practices in Light of Fraser's Social Justice Model*, **Roumiana Ilieva** examines the challenges in educating diverse students in a specific context. She uses Nancy Fraser's multidimensional social justice model to discuss English as an additional language (EAL) education in public schools in British Columbia, Canada on the basis of research published in the last decade.

Finally **Xianlin Song** and **Greg McCarthy** explore the current transformation of Australian higher education in light of global mobility. They are critical of the fact that universities tend to ignore plurality and differences in governing practices.

The feedback we received about the first issue of IJIBIDE was extremely encouraging. Hopefully, this second issue of IJIBIDE will serve to invigorate our readers and provide further impetus to critical and reflexive work on the concept of intercultural competence.

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