

## Article

# Overcoming Essentialism? Students' Reflections on Learning Intercultural Communication Online

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**Abstract:** The fields of intercultural communication (IC) and intercultural education are in flux and the paradigmatic shift is away from essentialist approaches on culture and interculturality towards seeing IC and interculturality as flexible, fluid, contradictory, political, and ideological constructs. This study presents a virtual exchange project, a joint introductory course on IC between a Finnish university and a French university. One of the objectives of the course was to provide students with a more critical, non-essentialist perspective on interculturality. This study presents an analysis of 32 students' texts (learning logs) that are processed qualitatively using content analysis to find answers to questions of (1) how students make sense of their experience of learning IC through multilingual online interactions, and (2) how different approaches on culture and interculturality are reflected in students' leaning logs. The learning logs are written by participants during their six-week learning experience. The findings indicate that students gained confidence in interacting with people from diverse backgrounds and using multiple languages. How students reacted to and reflected on the more critical perspective on interculturality varied greatly, with many learning logs seeming to juggle between different approaches. The online environment was considered a major source of concern prior and at the beginning of the course, but as the course progressed it did not represent a barrier within the documented experiences. Our analysis aims to help teachers of IC to better address the needs of different learners. We also discuss the challenges and possibilities of a multilingual intercultural virtual exchange with a view to creating safe and motivating spaces for teaching and learning about interculturality.

**Keywords:** interculturality; student accounts; teaching–learning; non-essentialist approach; critical thinking; higher education; virtual exchange

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## 1. Introduction

Intercultural communication education is changing, and scholars have recently suggested that there has been a paradigm shift [1,2], or turbulence [3], that reflects a broader development in the humanities and social sciences [4]. The paradigmatic shift is away from essentialist approaches on culture and interculturality towards seeing intercultural communication (IC) and interculturality as flexible, fluid, contradictory, political, and ideological constructs. The essentialist approach on culture and interculturality is often represented in comparative cross-cultural studies where national cultures are viewed as predetermined explanations for human interaction. This shift is reflected in approaches that focus on the complexity of micro-level situations of communication, where diverse prefigured cultural references are negotiated and co-constructed, “performed” [5] in a broader process of sensemaking [6].

The cross-cultural and often essentialistic understanding of culture follows the “Hofstedeian legacy,” as Holliday [7] (p. 6) calls it, by seeing culture as a sustainable entity that pre-exists in social interaction and predicts as well as explains human behavior. The

essentialist view, which may be characterized as “positivist” [7,8], is often based on the values and characteristics that differentiate national cultures from each other. Although these cross-cultural insights can guide our sensemaking concerning group-level differences and culturally contingent patterns on the national level, they may have little relevance when applied to the complexity of micro-level individual interactions [9,10]. Such macro-level, cross-cultural approaches do not take into account either the social context or the identity-based phenomena of intersubjective adjustment and adaptation that characterize interpersonal communication.

Non-essentialist approaches within the field of IC and education thus highlight the need to look at the ways in which various cultural patterns are actualized and negotiated through interpersonal communication. Cultures are seen as a dynamic, fluid, and multi-faceted processes [11], collaboratively constructed by participants through their interactions [12–14], taking meaning from but also deviating from prefigured macro-level constructs.

Many students in higher education (HE) have already been exposed to what Sommier et al. [15] call “intercultural washing,” which refers to “institutional discourses conveying misleading impressions regarding the importance placed on interculturality” (p. 3). This might provide students with particular expectations about a course on IC, and some might also be disappointed and even alienated by critical or non-essentialist discourse [15]. As Sommier et al. [15] point out, the “heyday of cross-cultural communication is not over, and its legacy is a challenge for intercultural communication, particularly in the context of teaching and implementation in HE” (p. 5). Despite the growing interest in global issues and IC in general, it has been stated that higher education institutions (HEI) and educational curricula often fail to incorporate the latest theoretical developments [3,15]. As educators at HEIs, our attempt has been to move away from essentialist approaches to culture and IC toward more critical and non-essentialist ones.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, HEIs have been challenged to look into possibilities for developing interculturality that are not bound to physical mobility. In the European context, the concept of “internationalisation at home” [16] acknowledges the fact that competencies associated with international contact can be developed even when a majority of students and faculty are not geographically mobile. Research focusing on education and learning in e-environments is not new, but it certainly increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic, when students and teachers all around the world were forced to learn and teach remotely and e-learning became a much more massive phenomenon than in previous years.

Already, pre-pandemic research has shown that learning experiences and results in virtual environments can vary. For example, there are findings claiming that students’ grades may be lower in virtual courses [17,18] and that these can be less effective in terms of learning outcomes [19,20]. Online courses can also increase drop-out numbers and enhance negative feelings such as anxiety and loneliness [21]. However, there are also findings that online courses are perceived as more flexible [22]. There is some cause to believe that negative findings concerning loneliness and lesser or poorer possibilities of interaction may partly have to do with the era of the research, when technology was not as advanced: Newer applications and interfaces may better support interaction practices [23,24]. Lack of competence and experiences—in both virtual teaching and instructing and learning—and comparative research stances (face-to-face vs. online) may also explain the previous results. Studying how we can learn IC-related competence virtually reflects current—and we believe future—educational needs in HEIs.

This paper presents research that explores a six-week online learning experience on intercultural communication conducted between the University of Jyväskylä (JYU), Finland, and the University of Burgundy (uB), France. In the context of the special issue, it aims to address the questions of what is taught in classrooms around the world and what students really learn, linked also to the context of virtual learning. Very often, the scientific literature stops at recommendations and theorized best practices, without studying the reactions and experiences of the learners. The paper thus focuses more particularly on (i) how students

make sense of their experience of learning IC through this course, and (ii) how different approaches on culture and interculturality are reflected in students' learning logs.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Setting

This qualitative case study was undertaken within a collaborative online course proposed by universities of Jyväskylä (JYU) and Burgundy (uB) during spring 2022. Two of the authors (LK and AF) were the teachers of this course. A total of 42 students studying at JYU ( $n = 18$ ) and uB ( $n = 24$ ) took part in the course over a period of six weeks. Students enrolled at JYU were from different years of study and in general did not know each other previously. Eight of them were international exchange students, including one from university of Burgundy studying in Jyväskylä. The students registered at uB were all part of the same MA program in international communication strategy, and knew each other well prior to the course. All of the students received grades and credits on completion, as part of their home university curriculum. The collaboration was set up in the framework of the European University Alliance, FORTHEM (<https://www.forthem-alliance.eu>, Page accessed on 26 June 2022), of which both JYU and uB are founding members, and stemmed from personal contacts between the teachers. The course was first taught in 2021, in the context of the COVID-19 lockdown, and it was decided to repeat the course in 2022. The study thus relates to the second edition of the course in 2022. Prior to beginning the course, the teachers had attended online training together on how to plan Virtual Exchange projects, offered by the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Project ([https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual\\_en](https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual_en) (accessed on 26 June 2022)).

### 2.2. Pedagogical Design

Stemming from the fact that both teachers already taught an existing introductory course to IC in their respective universities, and based on the initial idea that there would be added value in getting students to talk and learn about interculturality in an international, multilingual group, the course objectives were established as follows (see Figure 1):

#### **Course objectives:**

On completion of the course, the students are expected to:

- understand and be able to discuss fundamental issues in intercultural communication, such as identification or stereotyping processes
- acknowledge and be willing to engage with different ways of seeing and with realities different to one's own, both online and face-to-face
- appreciate the complexity of human interaction and understand that culture does not determine but rather may inform our communication in different ways
- be sensitive to power inequalities inherent in multilingual and intercultural communication
- have confidence to participate to online discussions in multilingual and intercultural contexts
- have tools to participate effectively and appropriately to multilingual and intercultural discussions, teams and groups.

The course consists of online classes and discussions. In addition to this, methods of learning include selected readings, a group assignment, and individual assignments to be completed on Moodle / other online platforms.

**Figure 1.** The course objectives as presented in the shared Moodle environment.

The course objectives thus avoid explicitly framing IC in terms of national difference, but place the emphasis on stereotyping, power relations, and complexity, while remaining focused on developing students' competence through confidence-building and the use of digital tools to help mediate interpersonal communication. An intentionally broad definition of "interculturality" was discussed during the first session in order to try to situate the notion on the level of various social groups, and not simply international ones. Since the aim of the course was to enhance the critical approach to culture and IC, most of the readings, videos, and other materials provided for the students could be considered to

represent the critical and/or non-essentialist approach. Some clearly essentialist materials like Hofstede's theory were used to analyze and reflect existing literature and theories in the field of IC. All provided materials were discussed during the lectures in order to develop a more critical perspective on given concepts and phenomena.

The course was administered separately at each university (enrolment, grading, etc.), but used a shared online learning environment (Moodle), hosted by JYU, and that the students at uB could access directly through their own university Moodle platform. Common time slots were chosen for the six 90-min synchronous sessions held over Zoom, and students were required to further meet online at least once a week to carry out a group assignment. They were also asked to do a reading for each class and to complete an individual assignment in the form of a learning log with 6 entries, in which they responded to a set question or questions each week related to the theme developed in the week's reading and synchronous session. The course format, assignments, and synchronous sessions were planned and conducted together by the two teachers, who both attended all sessions. Even though they took turns moderating the sessions, they both spoke actively in each, and often shared responsibility for the different activities in a given session. The students from JYU, whose course entailed more teaching hours and more ECTS credits, also had further sessions with their teacher throughout the period, and wrote a further 6 logbook entries in relation to these. These sessions were planned as complementary but different to the shared ones, and are not discussed further here, and the corresponding logbook entries are not considered in the data analysis.

The pedagogical design was based on three principles. First, the explicit aim of the group work was not only to learn about interculturality, but to establish interpersonal relationships. Many of the pedagogical activities were designed to meet this aim. Intercultural contact that occurs at a functional level does not of itself foster intercultural friendships or develop intercultural competence [25]. In fact, "intercultural" group work, understood here as brief meetings with students from different countries, "may even reinforce cultural stereotypes" [25] (p. 707). On the other hand, meaningful and equal interpersonal relationships seem to reduce stress and psychological well-being in international learning communities [26,27]. Thus, we discussed creating and maintaining interpersonal relationships and set activities that drew attention to similarities [28], encouraging students to have personal discussions at the beginning of the more task-oriented group meetings. The aim was to focus on finding ways to help them connect, without dwelling solely on differences. Holliday and Amadasí [29] call this "finding non-essentialistic, or deCentredthreads", and our aim was to provide student groups with possibilities to engage in constructive dialogue where everyone would feel invited and included.

Second, even when time is left for interpersonal relationships to be established, this does not guarantee that equal and supportive learning communities will develop. Issues of power, especially related to multilingual communication and language use, were addressed during the course [30]. Here we followed the idea that, as a whole, critical IC encompasses the intersection of different social and cultural dimensions, addressing power differentials and challenging the dominant narrative to reduce inequalities [31,32].

Third, the assignments and learning events aimed to develop reflexivity among the students. While being careful not to stigmatize those students holding on to their essentialist views and understandings of culture, we sought to explore together the different learners' views on learning IC in an HEI setting through virtual cooperation. The idea was to promote consciousness of and reflection on different levels of representation, prefigured commonalities within various groups on the one hand and emergent phenomena based on diverse identities on the other, in order to move beyond this apparent contradiction.

The group work, where students were working in mixed teams of 4–6 students, was a video project on stereotypes and was evaluated by both teachers. Online sessions applied the ideology of flipped learning [33] for which the students had been prepared beforehand (e.g., reading articles/getting acquainted with online materials), and most of the time spent

during the sessions was devoted to discussions on the materials and given topics (see Appendix A for examples of teachers' plans for the online session).

### 2.3. Study Design

The methodology was qualitative since our research question concerned students' experiences and reflections. Phenomenology is the study of an individual's lived experience of the world [34], and we followed the phenomenological path, as we are interested in how students perceive and understand the phenomena in question, and what kinds of meaning these phenomena have in their subjective experiences [35].

The data consisted of the individual assignments (learning logs). As a course assignment, the learning logs required the students to combine academic references from the readings provided, and their own experiences and thoughts on the week's topic, to write between half a page and a page on each topic (see Appendix B for the instructions and questions in the learning log). As a course assignment, the learning logs were assessed by the individual teachers. The learning logs were used as the principal source of data to answer the research questions identified in this paper (*supra*). All of the students were informed at the beginning of the module that their teachers and other colleagues would be carrying out research on the teaching activity. A total of 32 students gave further permission for the researchers to use their learning logs as a part of the data for this research project. Ten students did not wish their learning logs to be used as data for the study.

### 2.4. Analysis

We used qualitative content analysis to analyze the learning logs. In order to describe the main patterns detectable in the data as well as to shed light on variability within these patterns we applied qualitative thematic content analysis. The key characteristics of this type of analysis are the systematic process of coding, examining meaning, and the provision of a description of the social reality through the creation of themes [36].

The research design of this study is both rich and complex, as the learning logs allowed the students to make sense of their own intercultural experiences and understanding, and for this research, the researchers also tried to make sense of the participants' sense making. Thus, a double hermeneutic, two-stage interpretation process was involved [37], meaning that thorough reading and re-reading of the data was required in order to identify patterns and themes. As Neubauer et al. [38] state, "In cycles of reading and writing, of attending to the whole of the text and the parts, the hermeneutic researcher constructs an understanding of the lived experience" (p. 95). The thematic analysis process followed six steps: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, and producing the report [39]. As the first step of getting familiar with the data, we independently familiarized ourselves with the data set. Two authors (RJ and LK) read all the transcripts. Next, the data were entered into ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH (Berlin, Germany; version 22. 1.0.222'), which helps with coding, organizing, and managing data. Then we began conducting thematic analysis [39], developing a preliminary codebook with emergent codes for analysis. Next, all relevant data were connected for each code, and then potential themes were searched for and codes were gathered into themes (e.g., expectations vs. learning outcomes, emotions and feelings in learning, virtual learning environment, multilingual communication, different approaches to interculturality). During data analysis, passages evidencing the themes were highlighted and pseudonyms were created for the students. While presenting the data the logbook citations are verbatim (uncorrected), and all names given are pseudonyms.

Since we see knowledge as an intersubjective construct [40], we must remain aware as researchers of the strength of our own possible presumptions and interpretations when conducting the analysis: We are documenting researchers' interpretations of others' interpretations of their lived experiences. This means that we as researchers are interpreting the learning logs, which are themselves staged accounts of student interpretations based on



experience [41], produced in order to get a good grade by performing in accordance with the task guidelines set (see Appendix A). Furthermore, as both teachers and researchers the two authors concerned endeavored to remain conscious, throughout the process, of their double role in the classroom and when analyzing the data [42].

### 3. Results and Discussion

The data analysis revealed at least two major elements that enhanced students' learning in the given context of this online course. First, the pedagogical solutions that aimed at enhancing interpersonal relationships appeared to indeed influence the atmosphere among participants in a positive way. Second, integrating issues of language, power, and multilingual communication seemed to provide students with possibilities and tools to enhance their confidence in using multiple languages and language repertoires.

Many participants commented on the relaxed and trusting atmosphere that was created within the larger or smaller groups. This atmosphere was partly the cause, but also a consequence, of students gaining confidence both in using different languages and in working with their different classmates as the course moved on. In the comments related to the expectations that the students had about the course, many pointed out that, at the beginning of the course, they experienced uncertainty about the task at hand as well as their own language competence or being able to understand and treat others respectfully.

"Also, I was worried when teachers announced the instructions for the group work because I didn't know how to organize my group. In addition, I was a little stressed to work with people that I didn't know because each of us had it's work method. So, I feared that our methods were not compatible and therefore our work was inefficient". (Lucie, uB)

Later the same student described how the worries had been relieved during the course and how the learning experience had turned out to be a valuable one:

"... with time I realized that it's possible to work efficiently even if we don't have the same work method. I also have realized that it was a challenge at the same time enriching and educational especially for our future professional experiences". (Lucie, uB)

Previous studies have indicated that students who wish to learn about "other cultures" often fear making mistakes and wish to manage possible uncertainty through culture-specific knowledge [43]. Indeed, feelings and emotions are a fundamental part of learning. It has been stated that when learners reflect on and analyze new and broader views and approaches, they need to deal with uncomfortable feelings [44]. Furthermore, Holmes and O'Neill [25], in their study of how students acquired and evaluated intercultural competence over a six-week period with a previously unknown "cultural Other," point out that "developing intercultural competence encompasses processes of acknowledging reluctance and fear, foregrounding and questioning stereotypes, monitoring feelings and emotions, working through confusion, and grappling with complexity" (p. 707). On top of this, the online dimension was identified by some as a supplementary barrier.

"During this first session, I learnt and noticed that I was more excited about the course than I could have thought before. I had some preconceptions about how I would react facing an entire class of complete strangers, moreover in a zoom interview: because of COVID19 my shyness increased and I feel like talking to someone I don't know behind a screen is really hard to me". (Charlotte, uB)

The comments that the students made on the format of the course were mainly about the impact it had on communication (e.g., increased uncertainty and anxiety). Furthermore, it was often mentioned as an added difficulty in relation to the final assignment. Nineteen out of the 32 student learning logs did mention the online aspect of the course (mostly just brief comments), 17 out of 19 students mentioned it in the first week mainly in a negative

way, and only 5 students mentioned it in a later question. One student analyzed the feelings he had experienced in relation to the novel online situation:

“I have felt very tired after our meetings and the communication has been a bit challenging for me. I often found myself thinking how I should response or interrupt one, when something is not what I have thoughts to be or how should I disagree with other without being rude [ . . . ] Trying to cooperate with others and being polite feels challenging when I’m not sure how other will comprehend me or my actions. I’m sure that communicating via zoom adds even more to this challenge”. (Lenni, JYU)

There are previous studies suggesting that participating in online environments can be poorer compared to face-to-face learning [45] and cause anxiety and withdrawals [46]. The teacher can have an important role if they notice and help students address these emotions and attitudes, hopefully thus enhancing learning conditions and outcomes.

Despite the few negative experiences, as a whole, students seemed to benefit from the learning experience by gaining confidence not only in using English, but also in dealing with uncertainties rising from different time zones, overlapping schedules, multimodal cooperation, and different expectations about the group work. The analysis revealed that the incorporation of the issues of language and multilingual communication as a part of the course contents was an element that proved to be working well. Many students did report having learned to utilize their multiple language repertoires, and having gained confidence in communicating with others seen as culturally “different.”

“In sum, mixing languages makes me realize that I have a strength in sociolinguistic attention, sometimes acting as a mediator between French (2 partners) and Italian (1 partner)”. (Xavier, JYU)

“What I particularly appreciated in this experience is that I improved my intercultural communication skills. [ . . . ] I was also able to realize that I had a certain ease in expressing myself with foreigners, and if I didn’t have the vocabulary to say what I wanted, I always found a way to make myself understood. I had never necessarily noticed these skills before, but through this course and this experience, I was able to develop them even more”. (Zoé, uB)

Many scholars have pointed out that models and theories of IC often ignore the language dimension [30,31]. This study clearly shows that students do benefit from learning skills and abilities that enable them to use and exploit their multilingual repertoire, and adapt language use in plurilingual situations by, for example, breaking down complicated information. Furthermore, the ability to manage the coexistence of several languages in interaction, and the ability to exploit interaction for language learning and enlarging one’s own multilingual and multicultural profile (see [47]), were the issues that students mentioned in their learning logs.

### 3.1. Different Approaches to IC and Interculturality

As a second research question in our study, we wanted to find out how different approaches to culture and interculturality were reflected in student learning logs. Some student texts remained skeptical to non-essentialist approaches, whereas others demonstrated students’ ability to analyze interactions in terms of multiple identities and fluid understanding of culture, at least theoretically, and in this specific situation where they were being evaluated. Most students did embrace less essentialistic approaches within their texts. It is impossible to say whether this was due to the course or whether the learning took place prior to or outside the course (see also [48]), or indeed whether it had been identified by the students as a normative expectation of the teachers, necessary to get a good grade. Based on the analysis, texts were categorized as “essentialist,” “janusian,” or “non-essentialist” (cf. Table 1, *infra*). These categories are not strictly exclusive and do not describe any particular learning log or student who wrote the learning log.

**Table 1.** Categories of different approaches on intercultural communication and interculturality.

Approach to Intercultural Communication	Description/Analysis
Essentialist	Learning logs that would reject non-essentialist thinking. Clear categorizations are used to explain people's behavior and IC. Culture is viewed as a stable construction that determines interaction in every given situation and context.
Janusian	Copying/borrowing ideas and thoughts from critical texts, but also being able to give personal reflections/examples relating to a non-essentialist mindset. However, in places, using the concept of a culture and identity reveals essentialist tendencies. Mainly considers non-essentialist thinking as being able to criticize the concept of a national culture and/or Hofstede's theory.
Non-essentialist	Often a critical mindset developed before the course. Consistent with their views throughout the learning logs. Might have previous knowledge/studies/vast experience of IC. Learning logs illustrate and discuss the non-essentialist approach with personal experiences and reflections.

The data contained only a few learning logs that were labeled essentialist. The following excerpt illustrates how some students wanted to “choose” the more essentialist view while still questioning the national “cultures”:

“I would like to talk about the essentialist view even if I agree with the two definition of culture but I think I will be able to talk more about the first definition. According to Hofstede, within the essentialist national culture, there is also a complex of sub-cultures. In my opinion this is true, we can talk about France. In France we have different regions with different sub-cultures [ . . . ] All these subcultures come together to form the French culture [ . . . ]”. (Louise, uB)

The analysis reveals that there were none that would have completely rejected the non-essentialist views, even though the analysis of the students' expectations prior to the course did reveal the typical wishes for essentialist shortcuts about national culture, exotic rhetoric of diverse customs, traditions, and expectations of “culture”-specific lists of dos and don'ts [15,43].

The second category of learning logs are those that illustrate what we call a “janusian” approach, after the Roman two-faced God, Janus, who inspired Fred Dervin's description of “janusian discoursing on interculturality” [49] (p. 47, also cf. *infra*). This category shows inconsistencies in using and applying the different approaches where the student “juggles with discourses that are liquid (open-endedness, (inter)individualism) and solid (culturalism, differentialism) at the same time” [49] (p. 47). In this category we placed those learning logs that clearly reflected non-essentialist thinking but also illustrated statements suggesting an essentialist worldview, such as the following:

“Many writers of intercultural communication end up using the term ‘culture’ as a synonym of ‘nation’ or ‘ethnicity’. Personally, due to this article now I strongly believe that culture has a ‘flexible’ definition, when individuals interact to each other and societies are made by similarities and differences because of the sense of belonging. However, a great example when culture often is considered as nation or ethnicity is the Japanese culture [ . . . ] the ones who try to follows other ways of behavior are rejected and margined, and by the end lead to mental illnesses which conveys to deteriorate the members of the culture”. (Xavier, JYU)

More than half of the learning logs were classified as “janusian.” Almost all of these were critical towards Hofstede's model and the concept of a national culture. However, the learning logs also revealed juggling and inconsistencies between the different concepts, such as culture and identity, as the following excerpt illustrates:

“I found particularly interesting the difference between the essentialist and non-essentialist concepts when it comes to talk about culture. Personally, I agree more with the non-essentialist one. I believe that culture depends on the person we're



considering as well as the context, the place, the moment, etc. [ . . . ] Two years ago, I had a Finish roommate so I could learn a little bit more about not only Finish culture in general but her own Culture". (Denise, uB)

Many of the students criticized Hofstede's model, but continued to use its categories or adopted discourse that could be considered equally essentialist in nature:

"According to Hofstede, Japan and Thailand are both in the middle [of the dimension of power distance]. Among East Asian countries, Japan has less distance, and it is because less affected by Confucianism. However, [ . . . ] based on my experience, Japan should locate in more strong power distance country". (Saki, JYU)

Even though the text above questions the accuracy of Hofstede's model, it was still located in the first group of texts, clearly demonstrating the essentialist approach.

The parts of the learning logs identified as "non-essentialist" expressed a critical view of culture and IC, more or less consistently throughout the learning log, rejecting cultural determinism. Within this category we placed those learning logs that showed a critical mindset that the students might have had before the course and that were consistent within their texts throughout the learning logs. Writers of these learning logs often had previous knowledge and possibly extensive experience of IC. Some learning logs also contained additional literature and references to discuss the given topics.

"Let me give you one example where the concept of nation has nothing to do with culture: I am myself part of the LGBTQIA+ community and it is a culture of its own. It is based on open-mindedness and the struggle against inequalities, homophobia, misogyny and transphobia. [ . . . ] The influence of this community is borderless and individuals from all around the world can be part of it [ . . . ]". (Baptiste, uB)

Some students also reported that the course had brought them words and concepts for the things that they might have pondered before but did not have the vocabulary to fully express. Learning logs located within the category of non-essentialist approaches often revealed students' ability to reflect on personal experiences in light of theories being discussed during the classes and/or within the selected readings.

"In order to share a personal example on this topic, I would like to talk about the non-essentialist view which corresponds to many experiences I have had [from a video gaming event]. [ . . . ] And this little personal idea proved to be more than true during this convention because indeed I could meet many different people without barriers of social classes, language (English being the main one), or cultures". (Yanis, uB)

"I have noticed that the essentialist view is more often used when the discussion is about someone's behavior that is seen as negative thing. In these situations, all the other possible factors that might influence a demeanor of someone is disregarded, and the culture is seen as only explanation. [ . . . ] I myself has also viewed a foreigners behavior from this essentialist view. The important lesson here is for everyone recognize this kind of thinking in themselves, and try to examine things for another point of view". (Risto, JYU)

Since the challenges and limitations of essentialist approaches to intercultural communication were addressed during the module, most of the students seemed to at least consider the different perspectives. We did not encounter what Sommer et al. [15] describe as a possible counter reaction when one's existing ideology is challenged. There were no reports of students feeling patronized or disregarded in the logbooks, which might have been a possible reaction when the mainstream taken-for-granted notions of culture and identity were criticized. Some comments on the contradictions with previous studies that had followed the essentialist, cross-cultural narratives and accounts were to be found among the learning logs, but this was discussed without references to emotions triggered.

### 3.2. Juggling between Different Approaches

What was to be found in these data is that instead of being emotional about learning a “new” and broader perspective on culture and intercultural communication, some of the participants were very emotional when expressing their views toward the “old” essentialist perspectives. Some learning logs, like the excerpts below, illustrated frustration towards the essentialist approaches and models, but also seemed to be knowledgeable on issues related to the broader spectrum of critical theories in cultural studies.

“Personally, I think the Hofstede “6D model of national culture” is completely obsolete and never have been relevant. To be completely honest, I’m kind of angry and frustrated to study this theory as something still important in the intercultural study when It’s actually impertinent. First of all, it’s outdated, the society evolved, but secondly, this study is the point of view of a white cisgender man, based on the testimony of other white ci-gender men, which is definitely not representative of the world, nor society, and is fully limited on intercultural study”. (Elise, uB)

What became evident in the analysis in relation to emotions and feelings is also the different values and even emotional loading related with the different approaches, as the previous excerpt illustrated. Arthur, a student from the uB, also wrote that, “I agree with the non-essentialist view. I think that it is dumb to resume culture to the essentialist view, because it only reinforces stereotypes [ . . . ].”

In many learning logs, juxtapositions of essentialist and non-essentialist approaches could be found, possibly following the discussion of articles that the students had been asked to read (e.g., [31]). Analysis revealed several learning logs that stated how students have *chosen* the non-essentialist perspective, or that they believe something to be more appropriate or accurate in terms of theorizing IC. As one student from uB wrote, “If I had to choose a point of view, I will choose the non-essentialist approach” (Marie). Another student from uB wrote, “[ . . . ] I also strongly believe that individuals can be part of several cultures, including some that know no physical boundaries”. (Baptiste)

IC is not the only field where the discussion and dialogue has become evaluative and dismissive towards “other” approaches. In organizational and management research, different approaches to culture seem to conflict to the extent of what Lowe et al. [50] call “inter-paradigmatic warfare” (p. 753). Although attempts are made to connect and/or combine different paradigms [50,51], the field still seems to be stuck between methodologically distinct research “tribes” [50] (p. 752). In addition, in the field of IC it seems to be mainly the two distinctive competing and conflicting approaches [15].

The change, maybe also a shift in paradigm, sometimes requires a “war” to take place and people to react with strong emotions that eventually act as the driving force behind the change. Emotional reactions were frequent in the data, notably on the subject of stereotypes in communication or when discussing Hofstede’s theory and research. However, there were students who clearly demonstrated the critical mindset and non-essentialist approach to the concepts of culture and interculturality, and who expressed this coherently:

“However, it is true that one can see a cultural difference from one country to another, but in the same country one can find people coming from different cultures and find a great diversity among the people of this country. [ . . . ] There isn’t ONE definition to hold and there isn’t one way to define culture”. (Zoé, uB)

From the teachers’ standpoint, such results raise the question of whether we recognize and appreciate equally the different perspectives or whether we should be promoting or defending a more resolutely anti-essentialist position. This was identified and discussed by the teachers as one aspect of the module that needed further thought, since they were not equally comfortable with the more open, less directive pedagogical stance that was jointly adopted. From the data, many students seemed to live in “reality in which competing

essentialist and non-essentialist can and do exist within the same people and place at the same time" [52] (p. 38). Should the fact that the janusian category was the most common among the logbooks be taken as a sign of failure or inability on the part of the teachers to convey a sufficiently clear and complex understanding of interculturality?

Dervin and Gross [53] talk about "failures" when referring to episodes in our unfolding interactions where we simply cannot meet the "noble objectives" (p. 5) of non-essentialism, no matter how hard we try. They point out that although non-essentialism is something we should strive for, we should also accept that in our everyday interactions we are constantly navigating between simplistic and complex views of other people and the social world—it appears futile to totally reject such "simplicity" [53]. What should we think about the janusian approach and the "mistakes" that our students (and we) all make, and what should we do about this?

It is interesting that this juggling and falling back onto national categories should be considered failure, since janusian thinking has also been linked with creativity. Rotherberg [54] defines it as "the capacity to conceive and utilize two or more opposite or contradictory ideas, concepts, or images simultaneously" [54] (p. 195). He explains that "Janus was a Roman god with two faces, the god who looked and apprehended in opposite directions simultaneously. He was the god of all doorways and his two faces (*Janus bifrons*) allowed him to observe both the exterior and interior of a house and the entrance and exit of all the buildings." [54] (p. 197). Further, according to Rotherberg [54] Janus was the god of beginnings, promoter of all initiatives as well as considered to be the god of all communication.. Rotherberg believes that janusian thinking operates widely in diverse types of creative processes, starting from the concepts of Yin and Yang, and Nirvana and Samsara, as well as religious conceptions of God and the Devil [54].

Such considerations spur Amadasi and Holliday [52] to suggest that there might be a way of discussing the two competing discourses in IC together. They introduce a Yin-Yang framework that would help us to see how these different discourses "curl around each other within the structures of educational settings and within all the people involved" (p. 37). The authors suggest that the yin-yang framework would help us "to see the nature of this entwined relationship and the hybridity which is the key to understanding it" (p. 37). Amadasi and Holliday [52] discuss the combination of different approaches, applied to the situation of children of migrants, but similar reasoning could be applied to the context of learning at HEIs. Thus, instead of being two-faced and failing, could the combination of two dialectically opposed levels of appreciation of cultures (macro and micro) exist simultaneously and peacefully, creating a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon? We draw on the macro level of the social group (national or others) to recognize that people seek to identify similarities and regularities in behavior in order to make sense of one another based on group identities, while simultaneously promoting the idea that each contextualized interaction and specific working group draws on multiple identities and cultural repertoires, creatively and constructively giving rise to a "negotiated culture" [55] emerging from the intersubjectivity of the encounter.

We believe that being able to see different perspectives is important, but this is not the same as confusing them. Macro and micro levels need to be clearly identified and distinguished. The data analyzed for this study suggest that many students do not have deep enough knowledge about the different paradigms and that the non-essentialist approach is still novel to many. Learning the non-essentialist approach seems to be a process where most of the students juggle between the different approaches. Here janusian discourse is still very much a result of not really internalizing many of the phenomenological and epistemological foundations of the critical and non-essentialist approaches to interculturality. However, the janusian approach could be considered a step to the right direction. Yet, since the aim of the course was to enhance the non-essentialist approach, is it enough for us as teachers to consider this a "successful" course in IC?

#### 4. Conclusions

Since the aim of the course was to enhance the critical, non-essentialist approach on culture and IC, it was interesting to see that the students themselves did not refer to the “cultural” and “national” differences within their own groups as much as the course progressed. What became more relevant within their groups was the multilingual aspects of the course. The fact that the students were able to distance themselves from stereotypical expectations and explanations within their interpersonal relationships and focus on other things (such as developing their multilingual competence) is a promising finding. Yet, what the learning logs revealed is that the non-essentialist approach was not always consistent, and the janusian approach was still the dominant one after this six-week learning experience.

Despite our aim to foster non-essentialist perspectives to interculturality, a main finding of the study is that many students still need more time to embrace this novel approach. Despite the fact that an essentialist approach to culture and IC has been discussed for some time now and multiple projects have criticized essentialism in intercultural communication courses for at least 20 years, the non-essentialist approach is still novel to many. Our data show that many of the students had not viewed “culture” and IC critically prior to this course.

As a pedagogical outtake from the study, we would like to highlight three things. First, we believe that it is very important to pay attention to developing interpersonal relationships among learners as well as teachers, especially if the learning environment is virtual. This not only enhances the trust within the learning community, but also seems to help students to overcome the stereotypical “cultural” and “national” expectations about each other. Secondly, according to the learning logs, addressing multilingual communication and language helps students to become aware of issues of language and power and enables them to work in multilingual and multicultural environments. The third takeaway is that learning the non-essentialist perspective (since this is a new approach for many) seems to be a process where most of the students juggle between the different approaches. This janusian approach could be considered a step in the right direction, though not fully satisfactory in light of the course objectives. Can and should we provide students with tools and possibilities to develop further? As teachers, when should we consider that we have done enough and that it is the students’ own responsibility to forge their own ideas and make what they want out of the course materials provided? Online environments certainly intertwine both learning and working internationally, so these online courses during studies could be more explicitly harnessed as learning, reflecting, and developing students’ communication competence in intercultural encounters.

#### 5. Limitations and Future Directions

Such questions point to certain limits of this study: As has been mentioned, despite endeavors to discuss different approaches during the module, it is plausible that students consciously or unconsciously interiorized the normative stance of the teachers in favor of non-essentialist perspectives, and that their desire to obtain a good grade led them to declare a position apparently in line with what they believed teachers might expect or wish to read. Class discussions of the Hofstede model left little doubt as to the teachers’ skepticism relating to national-level generalizations, for example. The value of such declarations, and the reliance on learning logs as data sources, must thus be questioned. The janusian accounts, read in this light, might seem more like unsuccessful or incomplete attempts to shed essentialist reflexes, despite the normative context.

Moreover, in such a small number of class hours, not only was there limited opportunity to develop alternative conceptualizations of cultures and intercultural communication, but the variety of models introduced to and discussed with students can also be seen as relatively restricted. As Dervin and Jacobsson [56] point out in a recent book, even the so-called “critical” perspectives on interculturality remain quite Western-centric and lacking in reflexivity. Here, the models presented arguably did not take the students very

far out of their academic comfort zone, and may have strengthened the idea that models of interculturality are all products of Western academic thinking.

From an ethical point of view, the dual role of teacher and researcher, adopted by two of the authors, can also be seen as problematic: To what degree did this stance bias both of these roles? From the teacher's perspective, awareness of the research being carried out can affect both course planning and behavior in class, whereas as researchers, it is difficult to be totally objective when reporting on and assessing one's own professional activity.

Finally, the explicit injunction to developing positive interpersonal relationships within the teams working on group assignments and the activities given to the students to this end also created a specific normative framework, which might have led certain students to feel that they had somehow "failed," where this was not the case. As Holmes and O'Neill comment, such group work in international teams, or brief meetings with students from other countries, "may even reinforce cultural stereotypes" [25] (p. 707). To try to avoid this, we engaged students in discussions on group dynamics and communication skills needed in multilingual and intercultural teams, as well as encouraging them to adopt a reflexive, meta-communicational stance. As it turned out, some of the groups encountered misunderstandings and conflicts that they framed in terms of national identities, and this possibly enhanced national cultural stereotypes for those concerned. As teachers, we discovered these conflicts when reading the learning logs, and resolved in the future to follow up with each team more closely on a weekly basis and to encourage more open discussion of such issues during the course. We consider it significant that the students who encountered these unresolved conflicts did not give their consent for their learning logs to subsequently be cited in this study, which might possibly be associated with implicit feelings of failure, regret, or shame.

Indeed, future research might also go further in considering the affective dimension in such learning situations. It is suggested that emotions and feelings play a key role in the (non-)development of intercultural competence [57,58]. Although emotions and their importance were mentioned on several occasions during the module, linked for example to "culture shock," multilingualism, and (lack of) power, these questions were approached through rational reflections. The explicitly expressed intention to create a "safe space" for learning, as well as the initial ice-breaking activities and relationship-building exercises given to the groups, were designed to set up favorable conditions for learning, but future research might seek to look more directly at students' feelings in relation to this. It appears that, at the beginning of the course, participating in an online environment did indeed cause anxiety and possibly withdrawals [45]. Fortunately, this time most of these anxieties were alleviated during the course, but the overall experience does remind us that the teacher has an important role in noticing these emotions and attitudes in time [45,46] and knowing how to react to them.

We also feel that a useful complement to the declarative data could be recorded footage of the meetings held by the groups for their assignments, allowing the researchers direct access to the behavior of students outside the more formal virtual classroom setting. This could give useful insights into language use, technology use, identity postures, and possible differences between the relationship-building exercises and other activities, etc. Finally, even if the digital dimension was not reported to be problematic by the students in their learning logs, it would be interesting to try to measure its impact on the interactions, both as a possible source of shared references helping structure online interactions through the use of particular tools, and as a potential barrier due to inequalities of access or digital competence.

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## Appendix A Examples of the Online Lesson Outlines (Teachers' Plans)

### Example 1: Session 3. Theme: Comparative Approaches to IC

A short intro including slides on the history of IC and comparative approaches from cross-cultural management, which were very popular in the 1980s and 1990s, and continue to be a reference for many today. Discuss the theme with the students and motivate them to study.

Small groups: (3–4 students in each group) discussion in Zoom Breakout rooms Icebreaker discussing the reading—how do they relate to the Hofstede model based on their own experiences? Do any of the dimensions seem to make more sense for them than others? Breakout discussion no. 2: To what degree might this kind of research be helpful? What are its limits or possible dangers? (Collect in Flinga, online platform).

Limits to identify:

- Methodology: white-collar workers at IBM are not a representative group.
- The research is now very dated.
- The dimensions appear quite reductive and tend to reinforce stereotypes.
- One score for very different things, some of which appear to cancel each other out—how can this be interpreted?
- Some strange geographical/“cultural” divisions.
- Macro-level indicators with no room for intra-group diversity—cannot be applied to individuals or in given contexts (though this is what the website seems to encourage).
- On the micro level, individuals adapt to one another, deviate from societal norms, draw on various cultures (large and small) to structure their behavior, depending on the situation.

Whole group discussion: How can we go about exploring intercultural communication on the individual level (interpersonal communication)?

Introduce the reading to do on intercultural competence for the next session.

### Example 2: Session 5. Theme: Multilingual and Intercultural Communication/Language and Identity

Exercise about language and identity and communication styles (write 5 sentences that all start with “I am”). Discuss the various things influencing our communication, not just the country we have a passport from. Situational and contextual nature of communication!

Exercise continues: Write 5 sentence that all start with “I am” in another language. Discuss: Did you write same/different things? Why? How do you describe yourself in different languages, and why this is? Do you feel different in different languages?

Introduction (including slides): Some theory about language and identity. An activity watching 2 videos: Language learning and language repertoires. The first video deals with the concepts of how we value different languages and ways of using language: [https://youtu.be/z7MIyQS9p5E?list=RDCMUcyf-fe1REybCjOBnHJbw\\_sg](https://youtu.be/z7MIyQS9p5E?list=RDCMUcyf-fe1REybCjOBnHJbw_sg): (accessed on 15 January 2022). Only watch the first 2 min.

The second video is a humorous instruction video of how to speak in a given accent (Finnish rally English) <https://youtu.be/1AtDEbHOcd8> (accessed on 15 January 2022).

Discuss the values related to different languages and dialects/accents: A short summary on multilingual competence/role of language competence (slides & discussion).

## Appendix B Instructions and Questions for the Logbooks

Instructions for the students at the Moodle learning space:

The logbook is to be completed individually and uploaded as a .pdf file to Moodle on 1 March. It will be evaluated and graded by Lotta KokkonenK/Alex Frame and will form part of your final grade for the module (coeff. 2), along with the group assignment (coeff. 1).

The aim of this logbook is to chart your progress throughout this module. You should complete it every week, based on the synchronous class sessions, your group assignment meetings, and the readings that you have done. The idea is to use this space to develop your own thoughts and impressions about what you have encountered through your online exchanges and reading, while answering questions linked to the reading and/or discussions in class.

You should aim to type around half a page for each entry. Before you start, take a look at the marking scheme available in the “Assessment” section of Moodle.

Questions for the learning log:

- Week 1 (beginning with first class): What did you observe/feel/learn about intercultural communication from this first session? What are your impressions and anticipations (worries, doubts, expectations) about the course?
- Week 2: Discuss one point chosen from the set reading texts and share an example that illustrates this from your own experience.
- Week 3: Using the Hofstede “6D model of national culture,” look up the cultural values of 2 countries you are familiar with. To what degree do these seem plausible (or not) based on the experiences you have?
- Week 4: What has your experience through the group assignment taught you about your own intercultural communication competence?
- Week 5: How do you feel that language skills affected your communication during this course, and particularly in your group work? How do you feel about using/mixing different languages?
- Week 6: Which videos did you find particularly interesting/surprising/well done and why?

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