



Implementing Critical Approaches to Interculturality in Higher Education

Guest post by Mélodine Sommier, Anssi Roiha, & Malgorzata Lahti

Critical approaches to interculturality have gained visibility over the years, both within and outside of academia. And yet, the increasing drive across European higher education institutions to implement internationalization strategies is often articulated assuming traditional notions of culture, diversity, and intercultural communication. This gap between critical research in interculturality and concrete implementation of intercultural education is what drove us to ask colleagues how they put critical approaches to interculturality into practice.

Their testimonies (reported in Sommier et al., 2021; 2023) made clear the role played by structural and institutional limitations specific to higher education institutions. The increasing precarity of teaching contracts, time constraints, and the push for (successful) results are some of the elements that make it difficult to try innovative pedagogical methods. Indeed, inviting critical interculturality into classrooms is a holistic process that takes time since it asks teachers to familiarize themselves with that approach as well as to depart from the limitations of traditional pedagogical frameworks.

Moving away from traditional pedagogical models reminds us of the relevance of putting critical interculturality into practice. The move is not only about teaching a different content, but also about re-investing in the social roles of higher educational institutions and practices. Western neoliberal educational ideology has been shown to prioritize ideas of neutrality, formality, technicality, and assessments (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), leaving little room for subjectivities to be acknowledged or for knowledge to be co-constructed. These latter elements are nevertheless central to a critical interculturality revolving around the dialogic negotiations of different vantage points in interactions (Collins, 2018).

Implementing critical interculturality therefore goes hand in hand with acknowledging and acting upon the structural limitations of higher education systems and of their underpinning ideologies. This echoes Fred Dervin's plea to "consider failure (of our research, practices, encounters, etc.) as a potential component of intercultural practice and research. In a world obsessed by success (Rubens, 2009; Kavanagh, 2012), this is a major challenge" (Dervin 2017, p. 9). Reclaiming failure as an inherent part of (teaching and researching) interculturality means accepting that

implementing new pedagogical approaches sometimes brings about disappointing or unsatisfactory results. For this reason, time and support, both from institutions and colleagues, are critical to making adjustments, trying again, and learning from each other. In all, this reminds us that teaching about critical interculturality is a learning process not only for students, but also for us, their teachers, as well.

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