EUTOPIA Reflective Portfolio

with the goal of obtaining the EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation

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A reflective essay on the experience of different notions of interculturality as a student assistant in a mentoring program

1. Introduction

This is a reflective exercise in essay format, which I deem relevant as a method and tool to achieve the learning outcomes for the EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation. In the following sections, I will reflect on my experience as a student assistant in the Intercultural Mentoring Program (ICM) hosted and provided by the centre for student services at the University of Freiburg, Germany. I was a student assistant for a duration of six months from February until July 2024, roughly working eight hours per week.

For me to reflect on this experience, I want to briefly highlight the double notion of interculturality as an integral part of the activity to be reflected upon and as an analytical tool for the process of reflection. On the one hand, the activity itself carries an intercultural significance, being coined as such in the first place. This implies that intercultural understanding and engagement, for now in a broad way, are a central element of the activity. On the other hand, interculturality and related concepts and their parameters serve as important tools in the process of writing this reflective essay. In consequence, intercultural thinking and its experience, practically and analytically, are present in this essay and my attempt is to not use them interchangeably but to use them as complements to gain a more nuanced understanding of interculturality through this reflective exercise. This double role of intercultural experience and analysis gives importance to contextuality. This being said, I want to focus in this reflective essay on the experience of interculturality from the perspective of a student assistant in an intercultural mentoring program and its effect on personal development. I will do so by reflecting on the structure of work and selected experiences following the notion of intercultural competence. In addition, I will briefly reflect on the formal and informal characters of interculturalism as a relevant category for its contextual understanding. This contribution focuses on the office work I did and the realisation of group events for participants of the mentoring program. It is less interested in the peer-to-peer mentoring scheme and individual mentoring experiences, which I was not actively involved in through my work.

2. The division of work and its social function

As I was starting this student assistant job, I knew that about half of the working time (four weekly hours) would be spent in the office. During this time, I completed administrative tasks that are important to keep the program going, like editing the website, doing financial reporting, and planning upcoming events. The other half of working hours would then be dedicated to realising the events. The events took place during the week and sometimes on the weekend. I felt positive about this division of working environment and the different tasks that they would entail, creating a mix of individual work

and highly social and interactive work. This structure allowed me to keep my personal energy balance in check while still having consistent times of social interaction.

The main purpose of the program is to facilitate intercultural experiences through mentoring directed toward incoming international students. Mentors and mentees are participants of the program and can share information focused on their studies and getting started in Germany, but it can also expand into more personal matters and interests based on individual mentoring relationships. As previously mentioned, my experience is mostly based on the events that bring students together, independent of their personal mentoring situation. These events have a social function and allow all participants of the program to get to know each other and in different settings in and around the city of Freiburg, through guided thematic events (events are different and focus on culture, art, sports, history, adventure, …). Sometimes events would also be workshops or a 'Stammtisch' (informal gathering to exchange on various topics without specific guidance or agenda). The idea of the social function of this program and my participation in it was a constant drive to be as helpful as possible in what I was doing. When events would receive less reception in numbers, at times I would question whether expectations of events were not matched. At the same time, I enjoyed events with smaller groups because it would be less stressful overall.

3. Planning interculturality and interculturality in action

The mentioned division of work and the distinctive nature of activities open cleavage of how I encountered interculturality. On the one hand, interculturality emerged as an object to be managed, planned, financed, and presented. On the other hand, it embodies a subject that emerges from the setting and interactions created in the moment during the events. As interculturality was more passive and the object of our work in the office, embedded in German administration and the institutions of the university, this also showed in the circumstances of the office work: German as a working language and a predominantly German office culture, in this case with flat hierarchies and a very positive atmosphere in our small team. It is in this context that we 'created' and 'produced' events for the intercultural mentoring program. After initial guidance on procedures and events through my boss and co-worker, there was a relative freedom to choose what the upcoming events could look like. New events could be created, or ideas could be taken from a pool of past events. I had not received specific education on how to handle potential responsibilities of this task, rather I felt that being selected for this position meant that I was given the trust to do well and that any doubts could be clarified in a collaborative and open environment. And so it is that I resorted to my experiences as a curious individual, as an international student in Spain, exchange student in Brazil, and current student of an international program in Freiburg, Germany, to approach this position and plan events for a group of international students. At the time it was challenging to quantify the weight of this responsibility in decision-making before any event would take place, as I would focus on finding new and interesting activities, exhibitions, hikes, movies, fairs, or other, that would, following personal biases, be a good setting to develop intercultural exchange, learning and fun.

Once the activities that were planned in the office would take place, the intercultural element would come alive in a different way. The planned activities opened spaces for active interculturality to happen and therefore take on the role of a facilitating space. After all, what I or we could plan are the technicalities of an event, but not the interactions and dynamics among participants that emerge during the event. For me, this means that I actively contributed to creating temporary spaces for interculturality to happen (through the organisation and realisation of events). What it does not causally imply, nevertheless, is a personal and unconditional intercultural practice. Although I did see myself connected to cultural aspects during the whole process, it did not automatically result in myself engaging in intercultural practice. Nevertheless, because of my past experiences abroad and my decision to apply for this position, I was inclined to participate in cross-cultural dialogue with students over the course of the events that I would guide as part of my working agreement. I enjoyed having spontaneous conversations about different topics with students with different backgrounds during these events. At the same time, I had to be aware of my role as a facilitator and stick to my responsibilities to ensure that the event would run smoothly.

Having described how different parts of my work refer to interculturality in different ways, I want to use the notion of intercultural competence to contextualise these encounters with interculturality. Intercultural competence can be understood as "the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations; it is supported by specific attitudes and affective features, (inter)cultural knowledge, skills and reflection." (Bertelsmann Stiftung and Fondazione Cariplo 4). This definition does not define a specific character of an intercultural situation and focuses on knowledge, skills and reflection as part of a skillset that is essential for good intercultural interaction. I would like to use this notion of intercultural competence as an entry point to characterise my work in the intercultural mentoring program as a development process of my intercultural competences. During the events, this development process would be more direct and agile. During my time in the office, this process would be present in my thinking and planning. After all, I was still interacting with intercultural topics, but in a way that is not as immediate as during event. At the time I was not aware about this, but the realisation of events also shaped the way in which I would draft reports on past events or organise upcoming events. It is in this way that my experience in the program shaped my intercultural competence over time, with phases of learning and application being more entangled than visible in first sight.

4. Intercultural experience in different event settings

Ensuring that an event runs successful can always require something different, for example in terms of the necessary attention to the surroundings, time commitments and overall responsibility. When I was giving a self-instructed city tour in Basel, meaning in another country, guiding 25 students through the city for about three hours, this meant that I had to remain focused on keeping the group together, sharing the touristic information as I had planned to, and so on. This limited my headspace and capacity to freely interact with the participants of that event as I may have wanted. On another occasion we organised, together with my co-worker, a painting event in the garden next to our office. This meant that

besides providing the materials, ending the event on time and taking some photos, there was plenty of time and space to interact with the participants, exchange ideas about our paintings and allow for spontaneous moments to arise in a calm setting.

What I want to highlight with this comparison are the different stages and processes of personal development related to interculturality that I underwent in my position as a student assistant when realising events by myself or together with a co-worker. I would like to coin them as external and internal interculturality. External interculturality refers to the process of working in a multicultural setting and providing incentives for intercultural interaction to happen. Internal interculturality then highlights the lived experience and the co-creation of unique cultural ways of being within the given setting. As the comparison highlights, some activities are more suited for one or the other type of intercultural experience and impacted my personal development in different ways. I believe that it is important and beneficial to experience these different situations to learn about the dynamics of intercultural spaces and gain an understanding for the effort and commitment it takes to incentivise intercultural learning and exchange. It might also not always be visible what precisely the intercultural element in each moment is. What I coined as internal and external interculturality are not mutually exclusive experiences, they can co-exist and refer to different modes of intercultural experience. Looking back at my experiences, I can make better sense of my behaviour during different events, where I was more open to immerse myself into direct intercultural scenarios or where I was more focused to make sure that an event would run smoothly, managing the group and respecting external factors such as transportation, climate, and opening hours. I feel that the modes of intercultural experience highlight that interculturality cannot be owned or deployed by someone over someone else. From my experience it is always collaborative and rests on interaction and mutual recognition. This does not mean that differing modes of intercultural experience are excluded from trade-offs. As highlighted through the example, capacities are limited and impact levels of attention, communication, time awareness and other.

What are the implications, then, of different modes of intercultural practice and experience (e.g. external and internal) on intercultural competence? As I already mentioned, the recognition of the different settings of an event made me understand more clearly how I behaved during an event. I could have reacted differently, but my values and attitude of professionalism led me to behave in a certain way to manage a situation and make sure an event would go well. Since one of the core elements of intercultural competence is effective and appropriate interaction (Bertelsmann Stiftung and Fondazione Cariplo 4), what seems relevant from an intercultural perspective is how I communicated my reaction rather than just the reaction itself. The reaction in line with its communication determine the level of practice of intercultural competence in my role as the facilitator of an event. In other words, if I was aware of the intercultural context and communicated clearly, inclusive, and with empathy, this would indicate my intercultural competence in an event setting. Looking back, I had a great learning experience in improving my intercultural competence in different types of events. It means that I became more resilient and less stressed by external factors, impacting my intercultural competence, for example in

bigger events or in events where reaching public transportation in time was important. I also became aware of where I may have overlooked certain needs initially, while also recognising the fact that intercultural competence does not always avoid cultural conflict.

5. Conclusion

In order to conclude this reflective exercise, I first want to reassert that contextuality is important. Therefore, it is relevant for me to recognise my work in the intercultural mentoring program as a fusion of formal and informal interculturalism. Being an official program part of an administrative institution of a public university, the events of the mentoring program are, from my point of view, an attempt at formal interculturality. This means that there were a given set of rules, norms and mechanisms that are inherent to the program and its existence. This could be the approval of certain events over others, the provision of certain types of food and drinks, the registration procedure to attend events, and the moderation of conflicts should they appear.

Informal interculturality would be dynamics that emerge spontaneously and are not moderated or guided by extensions of formal institutions and their members. From a relativist perspective, one could argue that this type of interculturality always occurs and cannot be properly tracked, because participants are free and their conversations not predetermined by facilitators. For this reflective exercise, I want to recognise the design and realisation of events as the provision of an operating framework. Within this framework, informal intercultural practice can happen, or a cross-cultural dialogue that extends to other informal spaces as intercultural ways of communicating, knowing and exploring. I believe that the pre-selection of several factors in organising a certain event shapes peoples experiences, but it does not fundamentally change the experience of interculturalism in every aspect, if one acknowledges that interculturality is commonly created and can of course be critical. The aspect of common creation goes beyond physical constraints like place, time, and language. It emphasizes the emergent character of interculturality in a setting where encounter and exchange between participants take shape. An example of this would be follow up questions to a remarks made by me during the mentioned city tour. In my understanding, the remarks made by students sparked another level of cultural reflection about certain monuments or architectural styles in that situation. In my opinion, this emerging conversation embodies the shift from a multicultural to an intercultural scenario. Then, the task of a critical intercultural notion is to invite a questioning of predominant methods and settings of intercultural learning and exchange, rather than rejecting them. This process can evolve over time by actively listening to students' feedback on different events, listening their concerns and wishes. It can also entail adapting a planned itinerary because of a specific need or request that is based on someone's cultural practice that is very important to them. While practical challenges can arise, it is important to be respectful and understanding and carry those experiences into future planning processes.

As an outcome of my work in the intercultural mentoring program, I was able to gain experiences about different processes related to interculturality. Where possible, I embraced intercultural experiences but also focused on a conscious path of learning. This helped me to become

aware of my own cultural background and use my personal experiences to navigate different situations outside my comfort zone. As an example, I turned to my experiences of living in Spain or Brazil as a student and reminded myself that it can have a positive impact when one is invited to an event where they can participate without many barriers, whereas that might not always be easy in a country that speaks a different language and has other forms of socialisation than one is used to. Stepping out of my comfort zone in certain situations, guiding groups and speaking in public, meant that I mastered a role that others took on in the past when I was among the international students seeking a positive environment for cultural learning and exchange. It was not always easy, but worth it. I felt that my efforts and contributions were appreciated, as some participants told me during or after events.

In this sense, intercultural work not only entails the formation of cultural identities, but it also recognises one's effort to expand a cultural horizon, to be curious about other people's stories and knowledge. The main point of an excursion where we informed ourselves, for example, about a specific history, was not based on internalising a certain knowledge, but to expand our interests, to walk elsewhere, to collect experiences and exchange ideas and opinions on the concrete subject matter, whether it is the architecture of a church on the German-French border, the geology of a fertile region we hiked through, or different approaches to hitting a strike at the bowling event. After all, intercultural learning and experiences also rely on cross-cultural translation, facilitation, and accessible points of reference. The provision of these services is imperfect by nature, but they encourage various types of social interaction to emerge und ultimately benefit intercultural values.

Appendix

Registrations of various events (selection), in the form of photos and short reports, I instructed and facilitated myself or together with my worker. Order of appearance aligned with the flow of the essay.

1. City tour in Basel

Available at: https://www.mentoring.uni-freiburg.de/intercultural/past-events ICM events summer term 2024

2. Painting event in the backyard of the office

Available at: https://www.mentoring.uni-freiburg.de/intercultural/past-events ICM events summer

term 2024

3. Workshop on different aspects of mentoring

Available at: https://www.mentoring.uni-freiburg.de/intercultural/past-events ICM events summer term 2024

Works Cited

Bertelsmann Stiftung and Fondazione Cariplo. *Intercultural Competence – The key competence in the 21st century?* Gütersloh/Milan, 2008.