

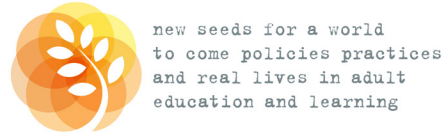
# **NEW SEEDS FOR A WORLD TO COME**

## **POLICIES, PRACTICES AND LIVES IN ADULT EDUCATION AND LEARNING**

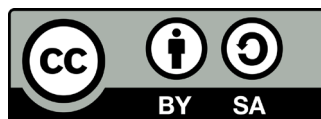
Proceedings of the 10<sup>th</sup> ESREA Triennial Conference  
University of Milano Bicocca,  
Department of Human Sciences for Education  
29 September-1 October 2022

edited by Laura Formenti, Andrea Galimberti  
and Gaia Del Negro

The Work has been published with the contribution of ‘Riccardo Massa’ Department of Human Sciences for Education - University of Milano-Bicocca.



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*New seeds for a world to come. Policies, practices and lives in adult education and learning. Proceedings of the 10<sup>th</sup> ESREA Triennial Conference, University of Milano Bicocca, Department of Human Sciences for Education, 29 September - 1 October 2022, edited by Laura Formenti, Andrea Galimberti and Gaia Del Negro*

The invitation for preparing the texts for this book was made to the presenters of the ESREA Triennial Conference. The authors are responsible for the content of the chapters.

First edition: June 2023

ISBN PDF Open Access: 978-88-5526-918-6

Catalogue and reprints information: [www.ledipublishing.com](http://www.ledipublishing.com), [www.ledizioni.it](http://www.ledizioni.it)

# Fostering Reflective Thinking and Combating Ethnocentric Tendencies. A Cross-Cultural Inquiry-Based Learning Experience in Higher Education

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**Abstract** - A pilot teaching project in the context of higher education has yielded some insights on effective teaching strategies for the promotion, among postgraduate students, of a habit of inquiry. This is meant as a valuable attitude in contemporary societies and a paramount prerequisite for developing reflective thinking and open-mindedness in a Deweyan perspective. Postgraduate students – pre-service teachers and educators – were involved in a cross-cultural and inquiry-based project. As the students' perspectives revealed, adopting an inquiry attitude contributed not only to the development of reflective thinking and open-mindedness but also self-empowerment and inquisitiveness.

**KEYWORDS:** Cross-cultural; inquiry-based learning; higher education; reflective thinking; open-mindedness

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper provides selected methodological insights from a pilot teaching project that took place in the context of higher education. The project, titled “Cross-Cultural Perspectives in Early Care and Education”<sup>2</sup> was grounded on the assumption that fostering a habit of inquiry is conducive for promoting reflexivity and open-mindedness. The inquiry-based learning pedagogy was enhanced by the provision of a cross cultural learning space.

In the complex world we live in, marked by unprecedented transformations, growing multiculturalism, intersectionality, and “superdiversity” (Vertovec, 2007), deeply held assumptions about learning and education are being questioned. It has become crucial to nurture reflective thinking (Dewey, 1933) and combat ethnocentric tendencies for learners of every level.

Education practitioners are at the forefront of the increasingly complex society we live in today. The religious, axiological, linguistic, and cultural complexity of education institutions requires practitioners to be trained for the encounter with the otherness (Bove, 2020; Braga et al., 2021). Future education practitioners should be socialized in a culture of critical inquiry and scientific attitude before entering the field, during their pre-service training in the context of higher education.

To address this urgent educational agenda, innovative methods for pre-service and continuing development of practitioners are required. Some methodological insights are presented here, drawing from the teaching experiences with postgraduate students that took place in the academic year 2021/2022 through the cross-national collaboration of two universities<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The project was co-designed and supervised by prof. Chiara Bove and prof. Mary Jane Moran. In Italy, Anna Chinazzi was involved as co-researcher and facilitator of the activities for the Italian students. In Tennessee, Macy Halladay (PhD candidate) co-supported the American students. Our sincere thanks to all the students for their active participation.

This teaching experience can be methodologically framed as a cross-cultural, inquiry-based learning activity in which “learning by doing” served as the overarching theoretical tenet. The cross-cultural students’ partnerships were established via the Internet between students from the University of Tennessee, in the USA, and the University of Milano-Bicocca, in Italy. The three-month virtual exchange took place during a period of reduced international and local mobility due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In such conditions, the value-added of this project was the provision of space, time, and opportunity to connect students from different countries, despite distance.

Students were scaffolded throughout the process and encouraged to nurture a reflective attitude through research-based initiatives (marrying theory and praxis). The process was not only monitored for educational reasons: Students’ perspectives were also elicited to enable the facilitators (professors-researchers) to fine-tune the project for future academic years to come. Due to structuring a research-like teaching experience and assessing the process through qualitative research methods, teaching and research were co-constitutive.

Advocating the marriage between teaching and research meant moving from a traditional dichotomous perspective to embracing the idea of learning as a social practice. Research and academic teaching were meant as part of the same enterprise (Brew & Boud, 1995; Brew, 2003): They both were kindled by the spirit of active inquiry, “which is higher education’s *raison d’être*” (Westergaard, 1991, p. 28).

## **2. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS**

The cross-cultural, inquiry-based learning approach was the overarching pedagogical strategy, adopted to promote a habit of inquiry, a prerequisite for the two-fold aim of the project, i.e., fostering reflective thinking and combating ethnocentric tendencies.

### **2.1. Inquiry-based learning**

Inquiry-based learning (IBL) is a student-centered, “inductive” teaching approach inspired by inquiry-related procedures. Within a constructivist theoretical framework, students were encouraged to be active participants in their learning processes, instead of passively receiving direct instruction. IBL supported collaborative work during which students worked together on challenging tasks (Maaß & Artigue, 2013). Although the method has been generally more popular for science education, it can be implemented in a wide range of disciplines, such as education and psychology.

### **2.2. Fostering Reflective Thinking**

In a context marked by change and complexity, snap judgments should be avoided in favor of a reflective habit, a way of thinking, that enables one to “convert action that is merely appetitive, blind and impulsive into intelligent action” (Dewey, 1933, p. 17). It is the “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends” (ivi, p. 118). This attitude can empower people to cope with the new, not only by relying on past experiences but by acting creatively and intelligently. Reflective thinking involves “a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty, in which thinking originates and an act of searching, hunting, inquiring and finding material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose the perplexity” (ivi, p. 121). According to Dewey, it can and should be taught. An active inquiry-based approach is particularly appropriate for enhancing critical reflective thinking and practice.

### **2.3. A Cross-Cultural Pedagogy to Combat Ethnocentric Tendencies**

In our interconnected and multicultural societies, it has become a paramount educational goal to combat ethnocentric tendencies by creating opportunities and contexts in which to promote intercultural dialogue and “cultural negotiation” (Tobin, 2016; Bove, 2020). Ethnocentrism is the tendency to evaluate on the basis of one’s own cultural standards, which are believed (consciously or unconsciously) to be superior. Human beings constantly view and interpret the world through the lenses of what they already know, therefore it is crucial to get to know other cultural perspectives. For this reason, a cross-cultural dimension was incorporated into the project to foster the development of students’ cultural de-centering attitudes.

Engaging in collaborative and cross-cultural inquiry-based projects provides students with the opportunity to nurture their reflexivity and develop a “collective stance” that allows the possibility of viewing their “beliefs and practice through the eyes of the other” (Moran et al., 2017, p. 3).

Thus, reflective thinking is a crucial role insofar that it enables one to overcome prejudices, which are “prejudgments, not conclusions reached as the result of personal mental activity, such as observing, collecting, and examining evidence” (Dewey, 1933, p. 116).

### **3. THE “CROSS-CULTURAL PARTNERSHIPS” PROJECT**

The three-month pilot project, “cross-cultural partnerships<sup>3</sup>”, took place in the academic year 2021-2022, involving graduate students from the two universities. Each student was assigned to an international partner to cooperate in designing a research project from conception to completion of the implementation plan. A similar previous experience, piloted in 2015 (Braga, Bove, Moran, Brookshire, & Correia, 2021) followed the experiences of learning through interactions with critical friends (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009), and helped to structure the project presented in this paper. While in the first experience the students were invited to work in pairs without systematic guidance and more freedom, in this second experience it was decided to provide more structure and scaffolding: A facilitator was in charge of supporting the process and creating the context for students’ individual and collective critical reflections.

#### **3.1. Context of the Project and Participants**

The “cross-cultural partnerships” involved 12 students undertaking a postgraduate course in the field of education. Seven of them were enrolled in the University of Milano-Bicocca and the project was incorporated into the coursework of the module “Research methods in education” (within the Masters’ degree in Advanced Educational Science) in which part of the lessons were dedicated to students’ group work. The other 5 participants were students attending the course/module “Cross-cultural Perspectives in Early Care and Education” at the University of Tennessee. Collaborative activities among students were carried out synchronously and asynchronously, discussed with international partners via Zoom as well as during class time by reviewing clips from previous partnership Zoom videos. All students freely volunteered to participate, after the project was presented at the beginning of the course.

#### **3.2. Learning Aims**

The project not only served the specific academic goals of the courses in which it was framed (disciplinary knowledge and hard skills), but it was also planned to promote a deeper and transformative approach to learning (Mezirow, 1994), along with the attitude to “cope with the new” (soft skills). The main aims were to promote an inquiry and reflexive

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<sup>3</sup> Bove, C. M., & Moran, M.J. (2021). Encouraging Cross-cultural Perspective and Critical Thinking Skills in Educational Students through *Virtual Exchange and Negotiation*. Unpublished project guidelines.

attitude and foster cultural awareness toward the aim of identifying and combating ethnocentric tendencies. Both interpersonal and intrapersonal skills were pursued.

The learning context and the activities were structured to give students the opportunity to engage in collaborative research and cross-cultural processes in a sustainable and scaffolded way.

### 3.3. Activities

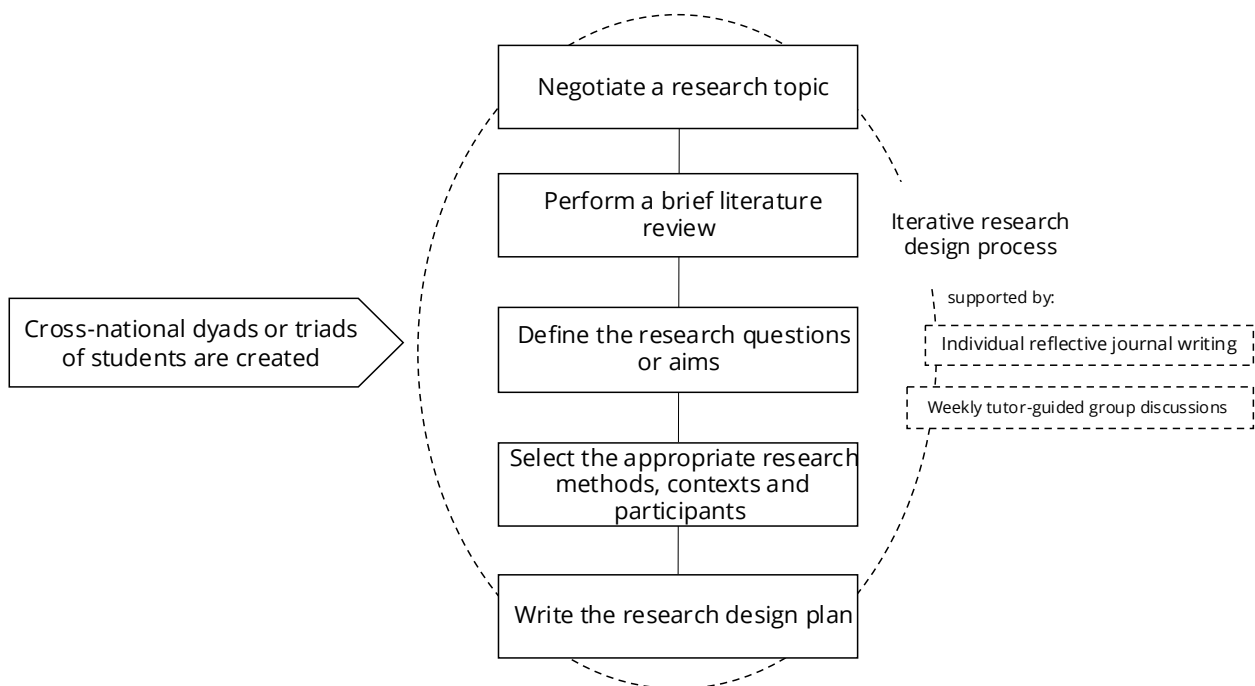
Three cross-cultural dyads and two triads of students were set up to work collaboratively on the inquiry-based task: They were asked to co-design a research project by negotiating the topic (within the education field), conducting a brief literature review, formulating the research question, and selecting the most suitable research methods.

At the end of the project, students were asked to write a paper that included the research proposal and a reflective and self-assessment section. They also gave an oral presentation with the support of slides to the whole class.

Students were supported through tutor-guided monitoring throughout the recursive and collaborative process of their qualitative research designs. Support was gradually reduced (faded scaffolding) to help them develop autonomy as partners and foster individual accountability.

The reflective stance was also supported both at individual and collective levels. Students were encouraged to keep personal, reflective journals. The affordances of reflective writing for the professional development of pre-service educational practitioners are well-known (Cohen-Sayag & Fischl, 2012; Etscheidt et al., 2012; Lee, 2008; Sileo et al., 1998). On a collective level, students from each country participated in tutor-driven critical reflections on a weekly basis. The process is visually reported in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Cross-cultural inquiry-based learning: visualization of the process.



## 4. RESEARCH METHODS

Throughout the implementation of the project, research methods were used to assess the proposed pedagogical approaches. Our critical reflections on the teaching experiences are based on the following elements:

- Active listening of the students during the individual and collective reflection sessions
- Final papers of students
- A short open-ended questionnaire, administered at the end of the project
- In-depth group interview with three focal students at the end of the project. The group interview lasted around 100 minutes and was recorded and transcribed

The objective was to qualitatively assess the pilot project to develop a pedagogical model tailored to promote reflective thinking and the intercultural stance of students in the context of higher education.

In the implementation of the project, a balance between flexibility and structure was pursued. This – combined with the facilitators’ inquiry attitude – made it possible to serendipitously embrace new perspectives in light of the expansive learning theory (Engeström, 1987) for which individuals could interpret and expand the possibilities of activity and knowledge in increasingly enriched ways. Eliciting students’ perspectives not only allowed us to assess the project according to its predetermined aims but also revealed it had a broader educational impact.

## **5. STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES**

Although this experience is based on data derived exclusively from a convenience sample of Italian students (7), listening to the voices of participants yielded some interesting methodological insights for developing future innovative strategies to promote critical reflective thinking and cultural decentering.

### **5.1. Inquiry Attitude, Reflective Thinking and Curiosity**

Participating in the cross-cultural partnerships project contributed to developing students’ scientific inquiry, fed by reflective thinking and intrinsic curiosity. Co-designing a research proposal allowed them to make sense of the complexity of scientific inquiry and to engage in reiterative and non-linear thinking processes. As an Italian student wrote in the questionnaire, she came to the realization that qualitative research is not a “unidirectional process” since “it was necessary to go back several times over our steps, over previously achieved milestones, to reshape and rearrange what seemed already defined”.

Engaging in an inquiry-based project fostered students’ inquisitiveness: “This project awakened my curiosity”, wrote a student in her final papers: As Dewey wrote, there are several ways to kindle curiosity and one of them is to engage students in inquiry-like projects. Following his argument, “Curiosity rises above the organic and the social level and becomes intellectual in the degree in which it is transformed into interest in finding out for oneself the answers to questions that are aroused by contact with persons and things” (Dewey, 1933, p.143). When curiosity is attached to ends that “require finding” through a “a sequence of inquiries and observations” (Dewey, 1933, p. 144), it is transformed into an intellectual plane, promoting “that open minded and flexible wonder of children” (Dewey, 1933, p. 144) that is necessary to act in educational contexts. A lack of questioning attitude is a danger, as Dewey clarified in his work: “Alertness, flexibility, curiosity, are the essentials; dogmatism, rigidity, prejudice, caprice, arising from routine, passion, and flippancy, are fatal because of lack of a questioning attitude” (Dewey, 1933, p. 214).

### **5.2. Cultural Negotiation and Intercultural Awareness**

Students had the chance to reflect on their cultural assumptions and get to know other perspectives. What impressed the Italian students the most was the difference in the conceptualization of disciplinary content, as it emerged in a questionnaire response: “I did not expect so many cultural differences and how we understand education in different

ways". A cross-cultural perspective is, therefore, useful to promote awareness of the socio-historical nature of sciences and combat naive reifications.

Intercultural awareness and open-mindedness are not a notion to be transmitted only by books and passive instruction. They are values, an attitude to be achieved through a dialogical process, often marked by misunderstandings and discomfort: "I was very challenged to really and actively listen to the other person. Sometimes it happened to me to misunderstand or to be misunderstood and this generated nervousness and frustration" (questionnaire response). An important realization is that cultural negotiation and cooperative work do not imply partners develop completely overlapping perspectives. Through a constructive dialogue, students "have managed to keep all the different perspectives together, without necessarily saying 'we must see eye to eye', but 'let's try to work together towards a common aim'", as a student told us during the group interview. As Tobin, et. al. argued in their work "The process of cross-cultural dialogue and negotiation will produce hybrid form of practice that combine the beliefs and values of the immigrant and host cultures" (Tobin, et. al. 2007, p. 37).

### **5.3. Self-empowerment**

Some of the outcomes were quite unexpected. Interestingly, students stressed that participating in the "cross cultural partnerships project" reinforced their self-perception, making them more confident, both at a professional and personal level. Engaging in intercultural exchanges enriched students and pushed them to overcome some professional resistances or (perceived) limits. As a student clearly stated in the questionnaire "the aspect that challenged me the most will seem trivial, but it was me with my ideas and fears. This experience allowed me to add important elements from a professional but also a personal point of view. I realized that I, too, can embrace these experiences, give them a try, without thinking I'm not enough for the situations and the requests".

Unexpectedly, the linguistic difference – that could have been an obstacle especially for Italian students - functioned as a stimulus to accelerate the ability to culturally decenter themselves. As one student clarified in his/her paper: "the possibility to speak and write in English, so not with my mother-tongue, gave me the opportunity to experiment [with] a sort of decentralization. Using words and expressions of another language forces me to go out of my comfort-zone and to experiment with the complexity to express myself in another way".

Furthermore, the importance of promoting a metalinguistic attitude at the pre-service professional development level emerged: One of the students underlined how the ability to deal with different languages, even if not in a proficient way, is essential to promoting exchange and collaboration in contemporary contexts. As Anolli argued "The monocultural mind is no longer sufficient to govern the complexity of the intercultural relationships that animate the world scene today" (Anolli, 2011, p. 39). On the contrary, the "multicultural mind", which is "flexible" and "creative" as it has been exposed to different cultures/languages, is a "tolerant mind in relationships with people of different culture (...) it indicates the willingness of subjects to accept diversity as a resource" (Anolli, 2011, p. 63).

## **6. CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER PERSPECTIVES**

The cross-cultural and inquiry-based project proved to be useful in promoting transformative and meaningful learning in pre-service practitioners' education. Potential further developments of the cross-cultural inquiry-based project may involve 1) forming groups purposefully according to students' research interests (instead of random grouping), 2) incorporating an empirical research experience in the phases (in addition to designing a research plan), 3) considering expanding the collaboration to other countries.



Although limited by the focus on a small convenience sample, this pilot project has revealed the great potential of these strategies in cultivating fertile seeds for a better world to come. A scaffolded and cooperative process promoted postgraduate students' habits of inquiry, reflective thinking, open-mindedness, and curiosity.

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