

From Interculturality to Culturality

The Bridging Function of Postdigital Lifewide Learning

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On 1 July 2022 in the scenic Dornburg Castles near Jena, Jürgen Bolten, keynote speaker at ReDICO's first E-Co-Conference, surprised the participants with a spontaneous and profound preamble to his presentation addressing critical global challenges.

Today, he told us, we have reached a historic turning point, a “Zeit-enwende”, marking a broader sea change. The once dominant inclination towards openness – seen since the 1990s and exemplified by the dismantling of European Union borders, the proliferation of free online services that have transformed the Internet into a dynamic Web 2.0, and the rise of emancipatory movements across the globe – has been pivoting towards a wider closure for over a decade. This turn towards a closing of society clashes today violently against the imperative of responding, in a sustainable and coordinated manner, to the challenges set by our complex, dynamic, and globalized reality.

On that day Jürgen Bolten criticized, in particular, the lack of prioritization of the ecological crisis, the ignoring of its irrevocable consequences, and this despite the recent experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, which means that we do know how considerable and rapid changes can very quickly dismantle and reconstitute our lifeworlds in new and different ways.

The pressing question Jürgen Bolten raised, in what would become his final public speech before his unexpected death, was how we, as a society, intend to confront and navigate this existential quandary. What resources and strategies do we require to surmount these challenges?

He called on us to embark on a journey of introspection and conscious societal transformation, in the advocacy of a holistic perspective, rather than isolated individuals seeking self-preservation, disconnected from any sense of collectivity. The message was clear: Our times need individuals who are willing and able to engage with uncertainty, by sharing expertise and resources

towards the development of innovative responses which guarantee a good life for all beings on Earth.

Precisely this ability to understand uncertainty not as a menace but as a challenge and to cope with it in a constructive manner, while creating new (fragile) normalities, is what Jürgen Bolten, in his extensive published work, has defined as intercultural competence. In this framework, interculturality denotes the encounter with the unfamiliar, while culturality represents the fabric of easily decipherable “familiar multiplicity” (Bolten, 2015, p. 118). Culturality emerges as individuals engage in habitual interactions within diverse contexts, thereby shaping their personal yet interconnected lifeworld over time. These interactions occur across various “fields of action” (Bolten, 2015, p. 40), contributing to the formation of a person’s multifaceted cultural identity. In contrast, interculturality signifies encounters with the unfamiliar, which can occur not only in unfamiliar contexts but increasingly within familiar contexts, due to the intensifying dynamics of change. What is initially unfamiliar can evolve into being familiar; interculturality transforms into culturality, while expanding the “horizon” (Schütz & Luckmann, 2003, p. 48) of one’s own lifeworld (Bolten, 2015, p. 117). Interculturality can, therefore, be understood as a transformative transition, enabling the assimilation of the new into the known, coupled with the simultaneous transformation of the self.

As summarized by Martin Buber’s I-Thou formulation (Buber, 1996), our identity is a product of the encounters we undergo. Therefore, what people know, do (including thinking, perceiving, and de/coding), and feel are contingent upon what they have learned until that moment in the different fields of action they have spent their time in. While traditional cultural knowledge acquisition was grounded in immediate surroundings, the denizens of postdigital societies now have access to an almost boundless array of fields of action. The Internet has considerably expanded the realm of cultural learning, forming the foundation for a cultural hybrid digital space accessible at the click of a button. Consequently, interculturality becomes an *ubiquitous* experience of unfamiliarity, and learning becomes not just lifelong but *lifewide*: We are permanently and throughout our heterogeneous lifeworld confronted with newness which we need to ‘learn’ to understand.

The concept of intercultural competence, as proposed by Jürgen Bolten, does not just, however, underscore the importance of navigating uncertainty constructively. It also centres on the importance of fostering an ability to communicate effectively and harmoniously across cultures, defined broadly and

fluidly, and in fuzzy cultural spaces. This competence does not merely concern the confronting of unfamiliarity, but the bridging of gaps, the establishment of connections, and the fostering of mutual understanding in a world characterized by increased interconnectivity (Bolten, 2015, p. 109).

As already stated, the digital space today plays a pivotal role in shaping interculturality. It is an ever-expanding field of action, which does not only intensify spontaneous encounters with unfamiliarity, but can also be used strategically for cultivating intercultural competence. The Internet offers individuals the opportunity to engage with diverse perspectives, access global information, and connect with people with various cultural backgrounds. Thus, intercultural competence in today's world involves not only adapting to newness but also actively engaging with it, harnessing the potential for personal growth and inclusive societal transformation.

Prior to dedicating the second volume in the series “Studies in Digital Interculturality”, stemming from the second ReDICO-E-Co-Conference on “Cosmopolitanism in a Postdigital, Postmigrant Europe, and Beyond,” to the diverse manifestations of cosmopolitan and authoritarian dynamics in the digital realm, this volume purposefully centres on the harnessing of the digital sphere's potential to foster intercultural competence. This is to be seen in the supporting of the transformation of interculturality into culturality by postdigital lifewide learning processes, contributing potentially to the development of a cohesive and inclusive world society.

Lifewide learning takes centre stage in this volume and, driven by their unique research enquiries, each chapter offers insights into the emergence of various culturalities within the digital realm. Nuala O'Connor, an award-winning Irish author, has already commenced the volume with her flash fiction piece “Of Wineapples and Acorns”, written especially for the ReDICO conference. While some chapters delve into informal learning, others explore strategies employed in formal education and provide concrete case studies. Despite this diversity in research objectives and disciplinary perspectives, a connecting thread may be seen among the chapters.

To enhance clarity and coherence, we have structured the nine chapters into three sections, each guided by a distinct thematic focus and accompanied by a graphical representation from the Chilean artist Akemi Paz, created especially for the ReDICO conference.

In the section entitled “Playful Learning, Serious Content”, the three chapters not only provide examples but also engage in critical examination of how playful frameworks can effectively convey substantial content. This exploration

encompasses informal interactions on social media and innovative formalized frameworks within higher education.

All three chapters in the second section, “Online Connection, Onsite Inclusion”, centre on the crucial role of digital platforms in supporting newcomers as they grapple with the complexities of integrating into new environments. These chapters illuminate the interplay between online and onsite experiences in fostering a sense of belonging, emphasizing how digital tools can facilitate inclusion, making it more accessible and effective.

Lastly, in the section labelled “New Teaching, New Frontiers”, the spotlight shifts to the opportunities and challenges brought forth by digital technology in the realm of formal education. These chapters underscore the significance of overcoming barriers, whether they pertain to geographical distance or limitations in competence, to advance learning in the digital age.

1. Playful Learning, Serious Content

Jürgen Bolten's article “Scimification: Holistic Competence Scenario Development and the Example of Virtual Intercultural Escape Rooms and Simulation Games” introduces the concept of “Scimification”, a term he coined by merging the terms “science” and “gamification”. This concept encourages exploration of the opportunities presented by digitalization in the development of creative educational approaches. It emphasizes the importance of addressing the complex interplay between knowledge, skills, and motivation, not least in higher educational contexts. While challenging the long-term suitability of traditional cognitive teaching formats, he also introduces educational innovations, such as virtual escape rooms and strategy games, which may significantly contribute to the holistic development of competencies.

The strategy game “Megacities”, featured also in Jürgen Bolten's first chapter, serves as the backdrop for Milene Mendes de Oliveira and Mario Antonio Tuccillo's investigation into interactional patterns fostering intercultural learning in remote virtual teams. In their chapter entitled “Intercultural Learning as an Interactional Achievement in a Digital Space”, they conduct a micro-analysis of interactions among old and new members of an international team, and complement this with an examination of learning journals authored by the strategy game players themselves. The study uncovers distinct learning paths for newcomers, emphasizes the strategic role that digital tools may play, and

underscores the responsibility of existing group members in newcomers' inclusion in the group in the formation of a shared culture.

In the chapter “Learning About Colonialism by Scrolling? The Twitter Thread as Lifewide Textual Offer and Cosmopolitan Potentiality”, Fergal Lenehan explores informal learning processes within social media, specifically Twitter. His chapter delves into threaded conversations on Twitter relating to European colonialism. The author emphasizes that the, at times, interactive nature of Twitter threads, where users may textually engage with each other, fosters a learning process which may lead to a shift of perspectives. This argumentation aligns with Reischmann's lifewide learning concept, emphasizing its voluntary and subjective nature, and connects, he argues, with Delanty's thesis that exposure to global issues may transform perspectives. As discussed by Fergal Lenehan in this volume, Twitter threads offer a platform where cosmopolitan cultures may emerge and, indeed, spread.

2. Online Connection, Onsite Inclusion

Yolanda López García's chapter “Exploring the Interplay of Lifewide Learning, Migration, and Social Network Sites in the Postdigital Field of Action” focuses on the potential of Facebook for informal learning. Following the bricolage approach, the author undertakes a multimodal analysis of two Facebook groups in which Latin American migrants in Europe offer emotional support to each other, while sharing knowledge and covering a variety of topics relevant in different phases, from decision-making concerning initial migration to managing life in the new country of residence. In this digital space, migrants find a vital platform to address questions that may otherwise remain unanswered. Through co-creating a common ‘E-maginary’, they not only share what they have learned but also enable others to learn from their experiences.

In their chapter entitled “Does Integration Still Take Place ‘at the Local Level’? Challenging a German Integration Paradigm in a Postdigital World,” Roman Lietz and Magdalena Loska critically dissect the traditional German discourse on integration. They argue that the focus on the material, local context no longer aligns with the postdigital reality of migrants. Today, migrants navigate a complex web of connections: their local community, diaspora, and their community of origin, all intertwined digitally. Drawing from recent empirical studies across Europe and North America, the authors reveal the multifaceted impact of ICT on migrants, including the profound influence on

identity development. Their work paints a comprehensive picture of how digitalization reshapes integration patterns, emphasizing the intricate interplay between migrants and their diverse cultural spheres.

In the final chapter of this section, “Buddy-Culture Goes Viral: Meaning and Potentiality of the Buddy-Approach in and Outside Formal Educational Settings”, Luisa Conti, Janice Darmanin, Christine Fenech, and Klara Räthel present a hybrid educational design developed within a European Innovation Project to enhance the inclusion of young migrants. Using a digital platform, the project aims to foster key competences among both migrant and non-migrant students, teachers, and educators, promoting the buddy-system and disseminating the buddy-culture. The article addresses the lack of systematic research on this topic by exploring the core characteristics and objectives of the buddy approach, drawing insights from a systematic literature review on peer buddy systems and empirical data from buddy initiatives in Germany.

3. New Teaching, New Frontiers

In her chapter “‘Global Classroom’: Postdigital Connecting Across Continents”, Siobhan Brownlie explores an initiative undertaken by three universities spanning different continents. The goal of their collaborative ‘Global Classroom’ module was to enhance students’ understanding of diverse political, social, and cultural issues. The author critically examines whether the arrangement of guest lectures, student presentations, and Q&A sessions on the selected topics could foster the emergence of a “small culture” and cultivate a postdigital critical cosmopolitan perspective among participants. Additionally, she reflects on the influence of the postdigital reality on student participation. Comparing the module’s methodology to Virtual Exchange, Brownlie emphasizes the absence of peer-to-peer interaction in small groups, questioning its implications for the development of intercultural competence.

Virtual Exchange (VE), as a concept and a practice, takes centre stage in Rawan Tahboub’s chapter, “Virtual Exchange as a Mechanism for Digital Education.” Integrating her perspectives as both a scientist and a practitioner, the author explores the methodology of Virtual Exchange which aims to foster intercultural dialogue and knowledge sharing. Drawing from literature on facilitative pedagogy, documentation of specific VE programs, and her personal field observations, she compares various VE initiatives, elaborating key elements that guide the method’s practical implementation and that explain

its pedagogical significance. Reflecting on its transformative impact, she argues for VE's potential in promoting peace education. Moreover, through her analysis, Rawan Tahboub underscores the success that Virtual Exchange has achieved in higher education in relation to the creation of culturality, and advocates for its broader recognition and adoption.

The chapter "Digital Competences in the Educational Sphere: A Case Study From Italy," authored by Tanja Schroot, Giulia Maria Cavaletto, and Roberta Ricucci, highlights the challenges posed by limited digital competence in the realm of pedagogical practice. The article explores digitalization in education in a case study drawn from the city of Turin, considering teachers' and students' competence, technical resources, as well as a variety of further factors that impact the use of digital tools for educational purposes and the creation of a new digital educational culture. The empirical study sheds light on critical aspects which underscore the necessity for teachers and educators to embrace a transformative approach: Digital integration demands a fundamental change in teaching culture, with educators first needing to fully understand its advantages.

References

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