

Reel Life

Film as a tool for intercultural dialogue in the classroom and beyond

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Abstract

We present a method to promote intercultural dialogue in the classroom. It builds on a carefully designed hypertext consisting of film fragments, linked together by one situation. While the fragments present identical situations, the protagonists in the films act differently depending on their value orientations. By presenting the students with fragments only, we trigger their imagination; they use their own cultural backgrounds to fill the gaps and make sense of the fragmented narratives. Our experiences from several universities in Europe show that the method works. The students fill the gaps in a number of ways, bringing in knowledge and also their own life narratives. In this way an intercultural dialogue is created. The method is easily adapted to fit also upper-secondary school.

Keywords: *Intercultural dialogue, hypertext, film fragments, value orientations*

Introduction

Intercultural dialogue, based on mutual understanding and respect, is hailed as a way to navigate successfully in a world of cultural diversity. Openness and respect, exchange of views and a willingness to change perspectives – these are facets of dialogue. Mikhail Bakhtin claims that life itself is dialogic:

To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium. (Bakhtin 1984:293; our italics).

Inherent in this definition is the stress on the concrete initiative that participants need to show, in order to fully engage in the dialogue. By asking questions, responding, agreeing or disagreeing participants show interest in and respect for each other. According to Tasos Kazepides “[o]ur respect for others means that we care about other people and their views, are willing to listen to their points of view in order to understand them, that we are open to alternative perspectives and are prepared to modify our views accordingly” (Kazepides 2012:81). He continues: “The purpose of dialogue is not to convince or influence the other person but to understand his or her perspective, concerns, values, emotions, assumptions and goals” (Kazepides 2012:82).

This is a complex process, and when we enter Bakhtin’s “world symposium” where the intercultural perspective is omnipresent, it becomes even more so. The Council of Europe in the *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* defines the intercultural dialogue as

an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage – on the basis of mutual understanding and respect (Council of Europe 2008:17).

The complexity of a successful intercultural dialogue demands much from its practitioners; intercultural competence is one of the prerequisites when we move into the “world symposium”. Our chosen definition of intercultural competence is the “ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and [the] ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality” (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey 2002:10). Intercultural competence can be subdivided into three interconnected competences: knowledge, skills and attitude, Michael Byram argues. To these he adds the aspect of critical cultural awareness.

In our film-based method, *Reel Life*, intercultural dialogue is both the tool and the goal. Quite concretely, *Reel life* aims to promote intercultural dialogue through intercultural dialogue. We place learning and understanding of cultural concepts at the centre of the dialogue among our students, thereby simultaneously promoting intercultural competence, with a focus on culture-general knowledge such as cultural values, attitudes such as curiosity and openness, and, in addition, emotions. *Emotions* is an aspect that is generally missing in conceptualizations of intercultural competence, as Darla Deardorff and Elspeth Jones (Deardorff & Jones 2012:285) point out: “Unresolved issues in current conceptualizations of intercultural competence include the absence of the emotional aspects”, and facilitators working with intercultural competence education are encouraged to “address [learners’] emotional stances” (Barrett et al. 2013:16). We think that it is crucial to address the emotional aspects; the feelings of our students must be engaged to initiate intercultural learning, the pedagogical process in which intercultural competence is promoted. Our students are placed in situations where they are moved, where their curiosity is kindled, and they start looking for answers, individually and together.

Our aim is to promote intercultural dialogue in the classroom, and to this end we have developed the film-based method, *Reel Life*. In this article we pose the following research questions:

- a. Do our students engage in intercultural dialogue?
- b. Does our method engage our students emotionally?
- c. Does our method kindle our students’ curiosity?
- d. Do our students develop culture-general knowledge?
- e. Do the students show respect as defined by Kazepides?

In what follows we will first present the method in detail. Second, the study will follow. Third follows our analysis of the classroom activities. Fourth, we will present our results and discuss them. We end with a short conclusion.

The method *Reel Life*

It may be argued that culture consists of a number of practices, of concrete acts (Jensen 2011:57). However, discussions of culture, and some of its fundamental concepts, such as world views and values, often risk becoming very abstract. Film provides an opportunity for students to move from this abstract level to something more concrete. Film is a place where people from different cultures meet as individuals. Film shows abstract cultural concepts in action – how people orient themselves towards values, what they do in practice when they try to act in accordance with the value of, e.g., unquestioning loyalty to their families. Conceptual knowledge acquired through theoretical literature risks remaining superficial, “at the level of information that has little or no impact on students’ understanding” (Wells as cited in Witte 2011:97). To counteract this risk we use film, because experiencing the meaning of these concepts in concrete films involves students emotionally and triggers their imagination.

Film makes it possible to “live” in other people’s worlds and helps students become aware of themselves, their own social identities, individualities, and values. Simultaneously they become aware of others’ social identities, individualities and values. In real life, cultural differences and challenges often become blurred; in *Reel Life* it is possible to pinpoint these types of differing value orientations.

Reel Life draws on Alain Bergala (2002). He combines different film fragments (stills and sequences) from one or several films, using certain criteria to link these fragments to each other. Bergala's method is designed for the teaching of film techniques and aesthetics – *Reel Life* transfers it to the promotion of intercultural learning.

Quite concretely, we select fragments with the same motif or situation from different films. In all of these situations the protagonists try to act according to their value orientations such as individualism and collectivism. The selected fragments illustrate how the protagonists act differently even though they have similar value orientations. They show what kinds of values the protagonists act upon in a concrete situation. In this way, the fragments show the orientations from different perspectives to counteract stereotyping.

By combining the film fragments a hypertext is constructed – a collocation of fragments removed from their original contexts, but linked together through a thematic strand. This hypertext, shattering the linearity of the original stories on screen, is the point of departure for the teaching activities. It steers the students' attention to the selected situations and value orientations, and it opens up for creativity and the active use of imagination.

We create a hypertext, consisting of the selected fragments – in between and around them we find numerous gaps. By presenting the students with fragments only, we make use of Wolfgang Iser's classic gap theory. Originally developed for literary theory and the written text, the gap theory has later been transferred to other media, such as film and paintings.

Iser defines a gap as “a vacancy in the overall system of the text” (Iser 1980:282) and these gaps, he claims, “trigger acts of ideation on the reader's part” (Iser 1980:283). The gaps are empty blanks with the potential to engage readers', or in our case, viewers' imagination. Iser explains that gaps have “no determinate content of their own [...]. As an empty space they are nothing in themselves, and yet as a 'nothing' they are a vital propellant for initiating communication” (Iser 1980:195).

Through the incorporated gaps our hypertext triggers the students to use their imagination (an act of ideation) to create stories that lie undeveloped in the hypertext construction. Even a film still presents many gaps – composition, camera perspectives and others provide empty spaces that trigger the students' imagination and engagement. By not telling the whole story – by challenging the viewers' capacity to create stories themselves, questions arise. What has happened? How will the story continue?

The way in which the students fill in the blanks depends on their own individual life narratives. In order for the students to be able to do this, these gaps are a sine-qua-non – should we present them with ready-made narratives, they would be steered and their creativity stifled – they would not be able to bring their individual life narratives into the equation to the same extent. The result evidently becomes as diverse as the students themselves. The hypertext gives rise to a kaleidoscope of perspectives. This forms the rich basis of our teaching sequence.

Our study

Methods and approach

Reel Life has been developed over a period of two years with five separate student groups. We met one group in Austria, one in Belgium, one in Greece (Crete) and two groups in Norway. All groups were multicultural. Group size ranged from nine students to 40, and ages were mixed – from 19 to 60. The Norwegian groups had recently enrolled in an intercultural communication course (10 ECTS) and therefore had some knowledge about cultural concepts such as ethnocentrism and values linked to collectivism and individualism. In the remaining groups few students had previous knowledge of intercultural communication. We used the ERASMUS teacher exchange programme to be able to travel. All student participation was voluntary.

To document the results of the classroom activities, we use our observations of the students' performance, as recorded in our notes taken during teaching. These notes include names of the participants and their backgrounds (as presented when they introduced themselves in the beginning of the teaching), reconstructions of discussions and our own reflective notes concerning impressions of the students' involvement, behaviour and interaction. The data was collected in the same manner from all groups. In our presentation and analysis of the results we draw on our experience from all groups, and use selected examples from the teaching.

Our interpretation of the teaching is evidently dependent on our own cultural backgrounds. We are ourselves not native to any of the countries in the study. Because of our being "foreigners" in all groups, many students were extra eager to explain things that they assumed we did not know. In addition, as teachers we were part of the discussions in the class and, although trying to keep a low profile, we also to some extent steered the students by our questions.

The point of departure of our specific study is differences in family values. Family values are fundamental values that influence us from early childhood throughout life. Furthermore, they may be the source of serious intercultural conflicts today and therefore crucial to address. As linking motif for the selected fragments we choose one that students, irrespective of background and age, have a relationship to, "wedding" and "marriage proposal" – as Kieran Egan (1992) points out – imagination builds on something known; it is impossible to imagine something completely unknown.

Our three selected films all include a marriage proposal, an official visit at the parents' home and the wedding, seen from different perspectives. Through the motifs of wedding and proposal the students' focus is steered to values linked to more collectivist oriented, patriarchal families on the one hand, and values linked to more individualist oriented, non-patriarchal families on the other. The film fragments show on the one hand what people do when their value orientation is towards honour, linked to the behaviour of female family members, towards respect for the parents, obedience and what loyalty means. They also show that family life is the main centre for social life. On the other hand, they show what people do when their value orientation is more towards gender equality, independence and individual freedom.

The fragments are taken from the Hollywood film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Zwick 2002), the German-Turkish films *Head-on* (Akin 2004) and *Evet, I Do* (Akkus 2008).

Greek Wedding: Ian is an American teacher of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant background. Toula is a Greek/American woman who lives and works with her extended family. Ian and Toula fall in love and marry. The film explores the cultural differences between their backgrounds. Toula's large family illustrates the pleasures of a close knit family structure, sharply contrasted to Ian's small and somber family background.

Head-On: Sibel, a young woman with German/Turkish background needs to respect her strict traditional and patriarchally oriented Turkish family where respect, obedience and honour are central. At the same time she desperately wants to live a free, self-determined life. Her solution becomes a *pro forma* marriage with Cahit, a bum, who is Turkish only in name.

Evet: Couples with different ethnic-cultural backgrounds in Germany struggle to have their parents accept their marriage plans. We follow one of the couples, two students, German Dirk from a family who believes in equality and independence, and Turkish/German Özlem who needs her parents to accept Dirk as their son-in-law, something that requires his conversion to Islam. Let us look at the teaching plan in detail.

Teaching outline

The five hour teaching plan consists of five steps, divided into three phases, a pre-viewing phase, a while-viewing phase and an after-viewing phase. Let us look at them in detail:

Pre-viewing

1) Associations to wedding: brainstorming.

The students are asked about their associations with wedding.

While-viewing

2) Film stills: wedding seen from different perspectives.

Head-on (00:28:05): The bride and the groom hurry along a corridor. There is a distance between them and they both stare straight ahead. A man and a woman follow behind.

Evet (01:25:02): The bride and the groom look happily at each other as they walk under an arch of arms holding roses. Some guests wear clothes that do little to hide ample body fat.

Greek wedding (01:19:21): The bride and the groom kiss in front of wedding guests in a church. Their body language speaks of devotion and happiness. There is a large difference in numbers between the couple's respective families.

We start with the still from *Head-on* as we want to show an intriguing scene and assume this would be most distinct from student expectations of a wedding scene. In this we follow Egan and set up "a tension between binary opposites at the beginning of the narrative structuring" (Egan 1992:105). The students first discuss how they react to what they see, and are asked to imagine what has happened before the wedding. Already here, the different responses elicited may initiate an intercultural dialogue in the student group by their bringing in their own perspectives and views.

3) Film sequences: proposal seen from different perspectives.

In the sequences the protagonists try to act according to different values linked to more collectivist oriented and more individualist oriented cultures, respectively (*Greek wedding* 0:43:02-0:44:09; *Evet* excerpts from 0:55:50-1:00:44; *Head-on* 0:07:41-0:14:36). The sequences illustrate how different perspectives may clash.

The sequence from *Greek wedding* is characterized by mutual love. In this short sequence the young couple is alone, in bed, and lost in each other. Family relations and cultural aspects are unimportant for the moment.

Özlem in *Evet* is a student who has a passionate, secret relationship with Dirk. He proposes to her and she accepts, on condition that she will be allowed to show respect for her father by meeting his demand that his son-in-law converts to Islam.

In *Head-on*, it is Sibel who asks Cahit to marry her *pro forma*. She desperately tries to reconcile two fundamental cultural value orientations – her family's expectations of obedience and behaviour that suits a Turkish woman according to her traditional family, safeguarding against shame and loss of face for the entire family, and her need for independence and personal freedom. This is an emotionally gripping scene. Not wanting to lose the students' interest through an anti-climax of sorts, we save it until last.

4) Film sequences: official visits at the parents' seen from different perspectives.

The official visits at the parents' follow (*Greek wedding* 0:51:07-0:56:42; *Evet* excerpts from 0:16:18-0:39:02; *Head-on* 0:19:31-0:24:35). The scene from *Greek wedding* illustrates the difference between a culture where the extended family is the centre of social life – and a contrasting culture where only the immediate family is important. In *Evet*, the marriage negotiation breaks down when Özlem's parents voice the demand that their son-in-law convert to Islam and their grandchildren be brought up in the faith. Their value orientation stands in stark contrast to Dirk's family where gender equality and self-reliance are fundamental. In the visit in *Head-on* everything goes smoothly, since Sibel, seemingly, meets her family's demands of proper behaviour.

Throughout the while-viewing steps we ask the students about their reactions to what they experience in order to engage their imagination.

Post-viewing

5) Sum-up: group work.

The students sum up their findings on posters, presentations and questions/comments follow.

In what follows we will use a qualitative analysis to first look at the way the students fill the gaps, and, secondly, demonstrate to what extent they interact and in which way. Obviously, we cannot comment in detail on all steps in our teaching plan. In our analysis we will focus on steps 2 (film stills – wedding) and 3 (film sequences – proposal).

Analysis

As mentioned above, gaps invite the viewers to fill them with their imagination. It turned out that some of the students drew, on the one hand, on knowledge gained from the field of intercultural communication, on the other hand on knowledge from their own culture or other concrete cultures they knew about, in addition to their own personal life narratives.

In the following, we present selected examples of how the students went about filling the gaps, and at the same time, the way in which they interacted.

Filling the gaps with knowledge from the field of intercultural communication

Students who had prior knowledge about concepts in the field of intercultural communication sometimes used this knowledge to fill the gaps. Immediately before the following excerpt from the discussion about the film still from *Greek wedding* (wedding scene), the students have discussed the discrepancy in the number of guests for each family. Below they continue with this topic:

Example 1: *Greek Wedding* – Wedding scene (Norwegian Group)

- A. The small family on the one side perhaps maybe doesn't like the situation, they disagree with the wedding?
- B. Maybe the groom's family isn't in the country?
- C. No, on the one side there's only the little family, on the other a very big family, an ...what's it called ...
- D. Extended family! Immediate family. Individualism and collectivism.

Students A and B speculate freely about the situation, without actually responding to each other's contributions. Student C argues against A and B, and refers to family sizes, recollecting something learned in the intercultural communication class and is then helped by student D by being given the exact terms. In the discussion following the extract the students then list various aspects of individualism and collectivism that they had learned in class, such as loyalty and freedom. However, their discussion does not amount to more than an exchange of concepts learned in the intercultural communication class. The students build knowledge, an important element in intercultural competence, but it is far from enough for the intercultural dialogue as defined above (see "Introduction").

Filling the gaps with life narratives

Another way in which students filled the gaps was when those of them who had their cultural background in contexts similar to those shown in the fragment, volunteered information for their fellow students and the teachers, who did not recognize the customs – trying to explain what was going on.

In the film still from *Evet*, the marriage is shown as a joyful and happy event, with a happy bride and groom. New to most students was the tradition of walking under a rose arch. However, it was explained by students who knew it:

Example 2: *Evet*– Wedding scene (Norwegian Group)

- A. This looks a bit strange – what are they doing with the flowers?
- B. It looks like one of those children’s games?
- C. This is the way we do it at home – we bring roses and make an arch for the couple.
- D. Yes, it’s to celebrate the marriage, I know it too.

This led to comments such as *what a pretty custom, it looks beautiful, how romantic* – but went no further than this. Evidently, the information shared contributes to culture-specific knowledge, but falls short of intercultural dialogue.

Whereas the discussion in example 2 provides only cultural information, the next example shows that such a discussion can gradually move on to an exchange of different views, and thereby take the first step towards an intercultural dialogue. Example 3 is taken from a discussion about the *Head-on* still, which shows a noticeable distance between the bride and groom and no eye contact between them. Most students reacted with strong feelings of surprise and unease. They volunteered different scenarios to give meaning to the scene such as a lovers’ tiff, having lost the rings – they claimed it looked like they did not love each other – why then would they marry:

Example 3: *Head-on* – Wedding scene (Norwegian Group)

- A. They are so unhappy, why are they going to marry?
- B. It must be a forced marriage?
- C. Maybe she’s pregnant and they must marry?
- D. I think they have argued a lot and want to cancel the wedding.
- E. No, it looks cheap to smile. There is the wedding night ... You have to show dignity. But she has a very low-cut dress ...
- F. What? Not smile because of the wedding night?
- E. No, it’s a very serious thing, you must show respect – and the girl can’t just smile, she must move to his family, and leave her own. She has to show that she’s sad.

After having suggested reasons for the couple’s behavior (before the extract) – reasons reminding of (romantic) mainstream films – the students continue listing other possible reasons. B suggests a cultural practice (*forced marriage*), C picks up the idea of forced marriage, but gives it another implication in terms of a moral duty (*pregnant*), while D returns to an earlier mentioned reason (*argued*). With *no* student E declines all former suggestions and introduces a completely new view of the scene. He interprets it completely differently. To him the couple shows dignified behaviour. To look serious is a way of showing respect for each other and the solemn ritual ahead. In addition, the student points out that marriage means for a woman to leave her own family for the family of her husband, a change that touches the life of the woman deeply. Student E, with a Norwegian-Kurdish background, then further explains this view on marriage in the discussion that follows (not in the excerpt), since for those students with a background in Europe this view is surprising. Those students who initially only saw romantic love in jeopardy now ask questions to E, wanting to know more about married life and family life in general in his culture.

The next examples illustrate how the students not only exchange cultural information and different views, but bring their personal lives – life narratives – and dreams into the discussion too.

The extract below is taken from a discussion about the proposal scene in *Greek Wedding* in the Greek group (all students were Greek, although not necessarily Cretan). This group was immediately split

regarding the issue whether this kind of proposal was the right one and whether it was emotionally touching. For some students the proposal was *beautiful*. They could imagine having a similar proposal – if it would be the *right time*, thereby picking up a discussion they had had earlier in connection with the opening activity – associations with the word wedding. They repeatedly stressed the importance of being ready for this step. One non-Cretan student (B) said that this proposal did not *touch* her; *marriage is too far away; I will not marry now*. Then the group's own teacher (A) asked a question that initiated a vivid discussion about personal dreams and marriage. The film fragment served as a prompt, but was quickly left behind in an intense exchange of different views on marriage:

Example 4: Greek wedding – Proposal scene (Greek Group)

- A. Would you say no to this proposal?
- B. Yes, I would say no. First study, then family. I am only 22.
- C. We have dreams for the future!
- A. But, marriage is also about dreams, and not only about obligations and demands?

(Silence)

- A. Why don't you marry when you are in love?
- C. We are not so mature.
- A. Love is not wedding, love can be forever without a wedding, love without wedding is OK.
- D. In Crete girls are expected to do nothing else when married, wife and mother.
- B. But this is our lives. Who tells you?
- D. They don't force you, but this is the way it is, it comes naturally.

(Here follows a story about a recent child marriage on the island)

- E. This is in the countryside – if you leave to study, you get different ideas about family.
- F. This has to do with relationships within the family, this decides the future. If the parents want to and can afford it, you can study.

The non-Cretan student B explains that she is too young to get married, keeping her view on a personal level (*I*), bringing in her own life narrative. C picks up on B's view, but speaks for what she sees as a majority (*we*) about *dreams for the future*, suggesting that these *dreams* are incompatible with marriage. The teacher A contradicts (*but*) and establishes an opposite standpoint, arguing that married life need not be only about *obligations*, but a way to fulfill expectations of happiness (*marriage is also about dreams*). B and C fill their position of not wanting to marry now with concepts such as maturity and the argument that love is possible without marriage. Another student (D) joins the discussion and supports the position of the other two students by making it more concrete, the situation *in Crete*. She tells the group about the expectations Cretan society has with regard to the role of women (*wife and mother*), obviously not in accordance with *dreams for the future*. The mentioning of the place, *in Crete*, gives the expectations a general validity. In addition, it suggests that D speaks especially to the non-Cretan students, the teacher and us, giving out information considered necessary in order to understand their situation. Student B, however, makes it clear that she is not part of this kind of "trap". She shows solidarity by using the inclusive expression *our lives*, suggesting self-determination; at the same time as she distances herself from the others by questioning the general inevitability they feel (*Who tells you?*) and thus making them elaborate more on their views that marriage is expected and comes automatically. After a story about a 13-year-old girl being married to a 16-year-old boy the Cretan students give a more nuanced picture by depicting differences between rural and urban life, and between families. – In the dialogue above we have the beginnings of an intercultural dialogue, the students exchange views – but more than that, they ask questions, they listen and they respond.

The next example will show how students fill the gaps with their own personal life narratives. It is taken from a discussion in a Norwegian group about the proposal in *Head-on*. All students were shocked by the

determination and desperation that Sibel shows when trying to convince Cahit to marry her. After the initial shock, there was a long discussion about why Sibel makes the choice to marry the “bum” Cahit. Some of the students brought up that she had to show respect for her family, using various concepts that they had touched upon in their course in intercultural communication. Loyalty to the family also came up as an important reason for Sibel’s decision.

However, many of the students looked doubtfully at each other, seemingly not being able to relate to what they had just witnessed:

Example 5: Head-on – Proposal scene (Norwegian Group)

A. You know you have to be loyal. Collectivist cultures.

(Two students mumbling together, then):

B. But we don’t understand.

C. Why is this difficult – just to go?

B. Why doesn’t she just leave? I don’t understand?

D. She can’t leave.

C. I don’t understand.

D. She can’t leave, her family is her identity.

(Silence)

E. Without her family she has nothing, nothing.

(Silence)

The two students B and C are from more individualistically oriented backgrounds. They cannot understand Sibel’s decision, and their repeatedly asked questions show that they really strive to understand what lies behind the conflict. In her turn, student D, from a more collectivist background points out that it is out of the question that Sibel would leave, it is impossible. Student C still does not understand. Student D then leans forward, making her view concrete by calmly stating that Sibel’s identity is inseparable from her family – her family is who she is. Here follows a short period of silence. Student E, also from a more collectivist background, repeats D’s statement, rephrasing it and then adds even further emphasis by using the pronoun *nothing*– a complete void – and then repeating it, by this adding maximum impact. After this, the group falls silent. Student D then continues by offering her own experiences of the “conflict within”:

Example 6:

D. You can’t just do what you want to do. Go out, move away, decide where to live. Family comes first. Family gives you everything. There is no way out. There is no solution. You lose everything. You lose yourself.

C. Lose yourself? What do you mean?

B. If you stay in this family you lose yourself, don’t you?

D. No, it’s the opposite, my family is my identity.

(Silence)

D. But sooner or later you have to choose...

(Silence)

F. I'm ashamed.

G. Why?

F. That someone from my culture feels the need for this step [Sibel attempts suicide].

The above dialogue shows how student D first explains to the others what it would mean, in general terms, to live in such a family where the group is more important than the individual: *Family comes first*. From her cultural standpoint she also claims that *there is no solution* to such a problematic situation, because if you leave your family *you lose everything*. *You lose yourself*. This is incomprehensible to student C, who really tries to understand and asks for clarification. Student B adds on to student C's question – from his cultural perspective he seems to suggest that he would lose himself *in* such a family, not away from it, and asks for confirmation of his view (*if you stay in this family, you lose yourself, don't you?*).

Student D, first having explained the values in general terms (talking about what *you* can or cannot do) now uses her own life narrative to try to get across her standpoint that differs diametrically (*it's the opposite*). She equates her identity with the belonging to her family: *my family is my identity* (our emphasis). Here is a clear transition from a general discussion of family values in one's own culture to a direct drawing upon a personal life narrative, that is, this particular student's own experiences, and her own personal views on her family life. For student D such a situation is untenable in the long run, *but sooner or later you have to choose*. In this remark she does not reveal her own personal choice, and she switches back to *you*. However, her point has been made, she lives this life, and the others listen to her.

After a prolonged silence, during which the students ponder on what they have experienced, student F brings in his own personal cultural background, thereby confirming that he fully recognizes the realities of the “conflict within” – *I'm ashamed* [...] *That someone from my culture feels the need for this step*, referring to the complex situation that the student group now has given so many diverse perspectives on.

Results and discussion

Before entering into the discussion of our results, let us briefly recapitulate. *Reel Life's* aim is to promote intercultural dialogue, using this very dialogue as a simultaneous learning arena for intercultural competence. We draw on Iser, Bakhtin and Kazepides to analyze our classroom activities.

In the following we will address two questions. Firstly, in what way do the students fill the gaps of the hypertext? Secondly, do the students participate in an intercultural dialogue?

The analyses show that those students who had attended a course in intercultural communication and therefore had some prior knowledge of the field are capable of using such concepts as collectivism and individualism with related value orientations to make sense of the fragments shown (shown in our analysis of example 1). In this, students share knowledge with each other and this may help develop the important culture-general knowledge aspect of intercultural competence. Further, they show that they have the ability to analyze a concrete situation, thereby displaying another important component of the concept intercultural competence, that of skills. However, this does not necessarily entail that the students grasp the practical dimensions of the theoretical concepts discussed, and therefore these concepts will remain theoretical only. Wells confirms this: “such [theoretical] knowledge, however carefully sequenced and authoritatively presented, remains at the level of information that has little or no impact on students' understanding” (Wells as cited in Witte 2011:96f.). The same is true for those cases where the students fill the gaps with culture-specific knowledge (examples 2 and 3). Exchanging this kind of knowledge may lead to new insights, but, as discussed above, not necessarily to understanding.

This means that filling the gaps with theoretical knowledge, however appropriate, is not enough for a proper dialogue. To take the leap from knowledge to actual understanding demands much more from the students. However, this leap is necessary for them to really understand the motivation that drives peoples' actions.

Examples 4, 5 and 6 display how the exchanges of views and information are brought to another level. When the students become deeply emotionally engaged by the fragments of stories on screen, something happens also off screen in the classroom. They then fill the gaps of the hypertext with their own life narratives, and thereby link their own lives and world views to those of their fellow students in a dialogue. The students bring themselves, their own beliefs, even their own life narratives, stories, “to the table” and share these with each other. Egan argues that “stories are the tool we have for showing others what it is like to feel like we do and for us to find out what it is like to feel as others do” (Egan 1992:55). The truth of this statement is clearly demonstrated in our classroom. The students’ frank exchanges about their expectations and hopes for love and marriage, their views on family and their open discussion concerning Sibel’s conflict within go far beyond the reactions that a textbook might create. These are the reactions that *Reel Life* strives to elicit.

As our analyses show there are many instances in our study that can be characterized as intercultural dialogue. When the students do not understand what they see and experience, they ask, they rephrase and they respond and clarify, they listen to each other in an effort to learn more about each other’s views and values. The students help each other make sense of the fragments by drawing on their knowledge, their own cultural backgrounds, and even their own life narratives. In this way they show every sign of aiming for the goal of Kazepides’s respectful dialogue – “to understand [each other’s] perspective, concerns, values, emotions, assumptions and goals” (Kazepides 2012:82).

Inherent in all dialogues that we have analyzed is the element of multiculturalism – all student groups were multicultural – in some of them up to 7-10 different national/ethnic backgrounds were represented. The groups thus had the complex background that The Council of Europe uses in its definition of intercultural dialogue, which is a respectful dialogue between “groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage” (Council of Europe 2008:17). In Europe today such multicultural classes are the rule rather than the exception, and *Reel Life* may therefore use this to explore the enormous possibilities that such groups offer when it comes to promoting both intercultural competence and the intercultural dialogue proper.

Conclusion

The results, so far, of *Reel Life* indicate that we are on the right track. Our study shows that there were many instances where the carefully designed hypertext engaged our students emotionally, and kindled their curiosity. In addition, they did not only develop cultural-general knowledge, but to some extent also a deeper understanding of this theoretical knowledge. The interaction among the students in the classroom showed aspects of respect and openness. In short, *Reel Life* made it possible for students to engage in intercultural dialogue, bringing their cultural backgrounds and their individual life narratives to bear on the discussions.

In fact, their experiences may eventually lead them to create new individual life narratives – combining their own backgrounds with new knowledge and the backgrounds of others. As one student expressed it after *Reel Life* – “I have always considered myself to be an open, unprejudiced person. Now I have realized that I am not. I have learned a lot”. This student did not only learn something new, she changed her own life narrative through participating in an intercultural dialogue. If we manage to produce a change of this kind in at least one student per group the project will have been worth the effort.

Afterword – prerequisites for successful implementation

We have pin-pointed some prerequisites for the successful implementation of *Reel Life*, that we would like to share with those interested in trying the method in their own classrooms. First, triggering emotions is central for eliciting students’ life narratives. Film is a medium that fits the bill. However, the selection of fragments is crucial; they need to “speak” to the students, to intrigue and challenge them. Proposal and

wedding may work as motifs in some groups, but for others they may seem irrelevant and uninteresting. Second, it is of utmost importance to build rapport with the student group. This group must be limited in numbers, preferably no more than 20 participants, to make it possible for students to participate actively. It is crucial to create conditions in which students become willing and able to open up in a respectful exchange of views and perspectives (see e.g. Dulabaum 2012:139).

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