

Communicative challenges in multinational project work: Obstacles and tools for reaching common understandings

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Abstract

Focus of this article is communicative challenges in multinational project work as well as how such challenges can be managed. By analyzing their communication in so called reflective dialogues and email correspondence the discussion sheds light upon how the participants of one such project talk about the meaning and pedagogical fruitfulness of horizontal classroom dialogue, and the degree to which they themselves actually communicate in a horizontal fashion within the project group.

Drawing upon the discourse on classroom communication and intercultural communication data was subject to a qualitative analysis. Among other things, different aspects of horizontality in the dialogues were discerned but no significant differences in terms of indexicality were found. It was also shown that variations in the degree of horizontality-verticality in the dialogues and email correspondence may originate in different views on gender, project management and relationships between colleagues.

Moreover, it was shown how reflective dialogues can be a useful tool for arriving at a common conceptual framework within a crossnational collaborative project. This said, the results can presumably be transferred to multicultural, and monocultural classrooms, to teacher teams analyzing problematic (or successful!) learning situations before 'taking measures', or in order to raise teachers' intercultural awareness.

Keywords: Horizontal – vertical dialogue; moral mediation; classroom interaction

Introduction

Each year research projects, drawing from a multitude of epistemological, theoretical and methodological assumptions, are concerned with intercultural interactions. Similarly, there are training programmes for staff working in intercultural settings. For *teachers* there are programmes providing pedagogical tools to manage classroom diversity. In focus for this article is one such programme, a five-country (England, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Sweden) EU-collaboration project on citizenship education, in which the authors of this article participated.¹

In the project, values were focal. Being relative to the society in which they exist, values – or ‘value-orientations’ as Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1960) and Gudykunst and Kim (2003) call them – inevitably bias people’s understanding of reality. Thus, to account for the impact of ‘cultural bias’ on the project work, the participants in the project were asked to reflect upon their personal values and share their reflections with their colleagues, generously and openly.

Prior to the project, the participants had agreed on a framework for the work ahead. Over time it became obvious, however, that those involved interpreted the framework differently and consequently several steps were taken to discuss, modify and (once again) arrive at a common framework in order to raise the intercultural awareness of *all* the participants. To achieve this, a strategy was worked out. The first step was a seminar, where the concepts of ‘moral interaction’ and ‘horizontal dialogue’ (defined below and from now on abbreviated as MIHD) were discussed, followed by a school visit, during which the project group had opportunities to participate in learning activities. After that *reflective dialogues* (Lauvås, Hofgaard Lycke & Handal, 1997) were conducted, where experiences of the school visit were in focus.

Albeit these activities did not bring about a completely convergent understanding of the project, they reduced and made the participants’ different understandings more manageable. The school visits served as a common topic in the reflective dialogues. In these structured discussions, one project partner at a time was at the centre of attention, whose experience of the school visit was penetrated thoroughly – with the aim to reduce or at least account for cultural bias impacting on his or her understanding of the project’s theoretical concepts.

Since the dialogues lead to several interesting observations the authors (not the whole project group) wanted to discuss them in a scientific article (which was unplanned). On the condition that they were to read the article prior to submission, the project participants consented. However, as they read the text several participants reacted strongly to the interpretations of the data, which they saw as inadequate, wrong or even insulting. This was followed by heated email-correspondence, which eventually led to revisions of the article and then to its submission and publication.²

Against this background and anchored in the discourse on classroom communication and intercultural communication, the following discussion further elaborates the above mentioned article. This is done by shedding light upon (1) how the project participants *talk about* the meaning and pedagogical fruitfulness of horizontal classroom dialogue, and (2) the degree to which they themselves *actually communicate* in a horizontal fashion within the project group.

A theoretical note on communication and dialogue

Colnerud (2004) uses moral interaction as one (of three) types of moral mediation in teacher-pupil classroom dialogue. Moral interaction takes place when the teacher treats pupils respectfully, listens to them, and where pupils feel as if they are met with confidence. Similarly, horizontal communication means that the two parties perceive one another as equal in status. By contrast when interlocutors are unequal in status, the higher status party can define, to a higher extent, the communication situation by the communicative style he or she uses (Giles & Hewstone, 1982; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). Yet, it should be mentioned that in communicative style the 'lower party' can, via the use of 'hidden transcripts', at least to some extent, counter the 'higher party' (Scott, 1991). With this said, the distinction between horizontal and vertical dialogue revolves around what in intercultural communication discourse is referred to as 'power distance' (defined as the extent to which individuals within a given culture expect and accept an unequal power distribution; see Hofstede, 1984/2005; Bjerke, 1998; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Stier, 2004).

Elsewhere we have argued that horizontal dialogue can stimulate the participation of non-native pupils in multicultural classrooms (Sandström Kjellin & Stier, 2008a/b) and enable teachers to practice moral interaction (Colnerud, 2004). Actively and intentionally narrowing the power distance gap between teachers and pupils is an explicit pedagogical goal in Swedish schools, whereas it is not emphasized to the same extent in other European countries (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2004; Sandström Kjellin & Stier, (2008b).

In Northern Europe much of adult communication is expected to be horizontal (Frønes, 1995), whereas adult-child communication inevitably is vertical to some extent (Janson, 2002; Sandström Kjellin & Stier, 2008a/b). By their institutional role, teachers enjoy a positional advantage compared to their pupils.

In order to be able to analyze adult-child communication, Janson (2002) talks of four aspects of horizontality, namely 'structure' (the institutional context), 'relation' (the communication's evolution over time), 'perception' (the information acquisition via the senses, and the acknowledgement of the validity of different perceptions) and 'interaction' (the mutual, symbolic exchange - verbal or non-verbal - at any given moment). Here it should be noted that 'structure' and 'relation' are not mutually exclusive (since 'structure' may contain 'relation'). For this reason we do not distinguish between structure and relation in the forthcoming analysis, but merely talk about 'structure/relation'.

For Janson the interplay between adults and children is always vertical as far as structure and relation is concerned - something which ought to be true for most cultures. Yet teachers can facilitate horizontality when it comes to perception and interaction. In such interplay, teachers cannot teach their pupils attitudes and values unless they themselves have scrutinized their personal attitudes, and values and then communicate attitudes and values in horizontal classroom dialogue, at least in perception and interaction (Sandström Kjellin & Stier, 2008a). For adult communica-

tion to be *equal*, communication needs to be horizontal, in all four aspects. In other words: when negotiating communicative meaning (or common understanding) in a multicultural collaborative project, dialogues need to be horizontal in structure, relation, perception and interaction.

An underlying assumption of multi-national, collaborative projects is that much can be learned in intercultural dialogue. Factors affecting the nature of learning are variations in (a) cultural backgrounds and personal expectations; (b) academic training and professional interaction skills and; (c) social norms. In the following – and using Janson's (2002) nomenclature – the aspects (a-c) pertain to structure or relation; in the method section it will be explained how perception and interaction are used in the data analysis.

Finally, it should be noted that although words carry transsituational meanings, such meanings also originate in contextual factors – e.g. the interlocutors' backgrounds, motives, relationships with one another, and prior conversations (Coulon, 1995: 17).³

Method used

Reflective dialogues are communicative situations where the interlocutors perceive each other as equal (Sandström Kjellin & Stier, 2008a/b). Such dialogues are structured discussions which are dramatized within a social (e.g. cultural or professional) context (Lauvås, Hofgaard Lycke & Handal, 1997). Reflective dialogues aim at making the dramaturgical script visible, both to explore the actions, statements and intentions of the involved communicators and observers alike.

In the aforementioned project reflective dialogues served to clarify the participants' mindset and account for cultural bias connected to the project's theoretical concepts, which were defined in advance. Inspired by symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), sociology of knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and phenomenology (Dahlberg, Drew & Nyström, 2001), this meant that one project partner at a time was at the centre of attention in the reflective dialogues. First he or she depicted a personal view of a common school visit; other participants responded with questions or requests for clarifications, allowing for elaborations on behalf of the person in focus.

The dialogues were tape-recorded, transcribed and analyzed. In addition, twenty emails from the correspondence following the dialogues were analyzed. Using Janson's (2002) concepts ('structure', 'relation', 'perception' and 'interaction') variations in cultural background, academic training, social norms and professional interaction were seen as components of structure and relation. The project participants' *experiences* of the school visit were examples of 'perception', whereas the performance of the dialogues was seen as examples of 'interaction'.

Using Coulon (1995), 'perception' and 'interaction' and the *indexicality* (in the ethnomethodological sense of the word, with roots in the writings of Husserl and Garfinkel) of the concepts of MIHD were analyzed. Coulon defines indexicality as:

... is all the contextual determinations that are implicitly attached to a word... It means that although a word has a transsituational signification, it also has a distinct

significance in each particular situation in which it is used [...] indexicality points to the natural incompleteness of words, that words only take their complete sense in the context of their actual production, as they are 'indexed' in a situation of linguistic exchange. And even then indexing does not eliminate possible ambiguities in their potential meanings. The significance of a word or an expression comes from contextual factors such as the speaker's biography, his immediate intention, the unique relationship he has with his listener, and their past conversations (p. 17).

To denote the most common indexicality of MIHD the use of concepts besides perception and interaction was analyzed. The email-correspondence on the revision, submission and publication of the article was analyzed using the concepts of 'structure'/'relation'. The project members were not asked for specific consent for this. The nature of the emails was studied when preparing the final project report.⁴

Aware of the problems of being an integral part of the studied group we kept as much distance as possible from the empirical data during the analysis. To further account for possible researcher bias we analysed each other's performance in the dialogues. All this meant that we took on a role of evaluating the communication pattern within the project group, in addition to merely being parts of the communication pattern. However, this does not seem to influence the validity of this study; it needs to be integrated in the evaluation of the project, though.

Results

In the following it is first analyzed how the project group described that MIHD was performed during the observed preschool lessons; at this stage only Janson's (2002) perception' aspect of horizontality is used. Additionally, indexicality and cultural bias are accounted for.

Then the character of the reflective dialogues is analyzed, that is say, to determine the degree of horizontality-verticality in the dialogues with regard to 'structure'/'relation' and 'interaction'. Variations in (a) cultural background and personal expectations, (b) social norms and (c) professional interaction and academic training are seen as 'structure'/'relation' aspects; the 'interaction' aspect concerns the 'acting out' in the reflective dialogues and subsequent email correspondence - i.e., whether project participants' verbal exchange of experiences was predominantly horizontal or mostly vertical.

Horizontality as perception – *talking about a lesson*

In the reflective dialogues, the project group first seemed to make similar reflections over the observed lessons as well as hold similar understandings of the meaning of horizontal dialogue/moral interaction. One member of the group said: "No instruction, teacher is one person and children [another; they were at] the same level". By the same token, another member of the group said: "Really a true interaction, not something like a theatre, but real interaction and that's moral, of course". To the project partners, the observed interaction was not perceived as

rehearsed but as genuinely horizontal where the children came across as at ease with the whole situation.

Overall there was a common indexicality (Coulon, 1995) of horizontal dialogue and moral interaction, and in terms of 'perception' communication was almost completely horizontal; on only two occasions efforts were made to convince partners to adopt another partner's understanding, something which can be interpreted as an expression of cultural bias (Sandström Kjellin & Stier, 2008c). Yet, it must be stressed that efforts were made to reach a common indexicality, and basis for the project idea.

A closer look at the dialogue, however, suggest that the interlocutors held different epistemological views on learning, different views on the teaching profession and on the inherent potential of children. For example: as opposed to in Sweden, the goal of achieving horizontality in classroom dialogue is by no means prioritized to the same extent in the other participating countries (Sandström & Kjellin & Stier, 2008a). Similarly, there are variations between England, the Netherlands, Poland and Portugal on the one hand, and Sweden on the other, insofar that in the former four power distance in the classroom between teachers and pupils is more salient and roles and responsibilities in the learning process are thereby clearly divided among the interlocutors.

Horizontality as structure/relation and interaction – *communicating in the project group*

The project participants' communicative actions expressed within the social dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959) of reflective dialogues exemplify Argyris and Schön's (1974) 'theories-in-use'. The dialogues gave examples of variations in cultural background and expectations, but seemed to have little impact on the level of horizontality as regards 'structure'/'relation' in the intercultural dialogue. At the same time, there were examples where cultural variations at the society level such as 'power distance' caused verticality at the interpersonal level – that is, in the dialogue with regard to the 'structure'/'relation' aspect.

Even if the very structure of the reflective dialogues *demanded* equal male and female participation, and despite active encouragement from male colleagues, the activity level of males and females varied. Hofstede (2005) distinguishes between 'masculine' and 'feminine' cultures. In 'masculine' cultures male and female emotional gender roles are highly distinct, and less distinct in 'feminine' cultures. In 'masculine' cultures interlocutors are expected to be more self-assertive than in their 'feminine' counterparts. Thus, the women from Sweden (commonly considered a more 'feminine' culture) were more involved in communication than their female colleagues from Poland and Portugal (often seen as more 'masculine' cultures).

There were not only variations in how much men and women talked – but in the extent to which they were listened to. On several occasions statements of a female were dismissed in the conversation, only to be taken seriously when a male colleague said the same thing later on. This may be explained by an unequal distribution of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1993) among the participants – developed in prior meetings, encounters and communications, and, though to lesser extent, by socially constructed gender roles (see Berger & Luckmann, 1966 or Chodorow, 1978).

The unequal distribution of social/cultural capital and traditional gender patterns were equally upheld, by men and women. This 'mutual agreement', and failure to 'see' what was going on illustrates Berger and Luckmann's (1966) idea of how reality is constructed, where people interact and together form mental representations of each other's actions and behaviours and where such images over time become integral parts of the social roles people 'play' in relation to one another.

It seems as if these observations must be explained at the interface of culture and gender power relations. By prescribing 'dos and don'ts', values are determinants of communicate behaviors. Also, recognizing the unequal gender distribution of power in academia the analyzed dialogues may be seen as an integral part of a larger question. In addition to this, variations in academic training, formal competence, academic status differences presumably affected the 'communicative space' available for each individual.

Additionally there are cultural variations as to how a meeting and a project is, or should be, planned. In the eyes of their European colleagues Swedes come across as overly structured or even rigid in the planning and work methods (Phillips-Martinsson, 1992; Bjerke, 1998). Similarly there are cultural variations in leadership styles among managers and leaders. Swedish managers are known to encourage staff involvement and abide to a 'democratic' leaderships style (Bjerke, 1998) – and yet, the female Swedish project leader was perceived to be 'undemocratic' by some of the male, non-Swedish colleagues. A possible explanation for this is that some colleagues could not accept a female leader – abide to what many people would consider a traditional *male* leadership style (which alternatively can be seen as either 'structured', 'direct' or 'authoritarian'). A more plausible contextual explanation is that these colleagues could not fully appreciate the structure and potential of reflective dialogues – although this had been discussed within the group on several occasions.

When analyzing the interaction aspect of MIHD – i. e. if the project participants' symbolic exchange of experiences was horizontal or not, we found that this was not always the case. On the contrary, there were many examples of vertical communication in the dialogues and particularly in the subsequent email correspondence.

Moving on, within the project group the level of English language competence varied significantly. There were colleagues whose mother tongue was English, those who could not communicate without assistance, and those somewhere in between. Variations in language skills inevitably impacted on oral as well as written communication – and, therefore, much of both explicit and embedded meanings could not be taken for granted. Seemingly, the native English speakers were unaware of this in the beginning, and used culture specific jargon, abbreviations and idiosyncracies – unintentionally excluding some of the less English competent. To compensate for this and re-establish horizontality probes were used and more 'manageable' questions were asked.

In the mail correspondence, before submitting and publishing the article, the project participants expressed both horizontality and verticality concerning structure/relation. Every second email can be labelled horizontal and every second vertical. Given this there was no dialogue in the sense of the word described earlier.

With the exception of the female project leader, to a large extent the other women chose not to participate in the email discussion, or tried to serve as mediators in the group. Instead criticism was targetted against the project leader from male colleagues who, when possible gender differences in communication were suggested to account for miscommunication, not only dismissed gender *per se* as a dimension in communication, but put forward universal claims as to what is a professional code of conduct. Both generational and overall cultural variations were presumably at play here as well. Generally speaking, power distance between men and women may possibly be greater among Dutch and English men in their fifties and sixties, compared to Swedish males in their forties.

All in all, the vertical nature of the communication within the project group contradicted an underlying assumption of the project, namely that horizontal communication between adults be one of *equals* – in ‘structure’, ‘relation’, ‘perception’ and ‘interaction’. The project also brought a number of cross-national differences in cultural value orientations to the forefront and illustrated miscommunication that sometimes occur in multinational project work.

Conclusions

In this paper we have shown how reflective dialogues can deepen our knowledge of how variations in cultural background, the unequal distribution of cultural and social capital among interlocutors (Bourdieu, 1993), personal expectations and aspirations, social norms and professional interaction patterns at times may obstruct intercultural interaction and cross-national collaboration. We have also described how cultural bias seemingly and often indirectly impact on the perception and interaction aspects of horizontal dialogue (Janson, 2002).

In addition, the social anatomy of gender relations and thereto related unequal gender distribution of power had greater influence on the structure and relation aspects of horizontal dialogue. For example: women in the group were less active communicators in the group. Less clear is whether the female project leader was questioned because of her sex or because of her management style. Taken together this manifested itself in significant verticality in the dialogue.

At the same time, the character of the communication must be seen in the light of previous disagreements and interpersonal frictions within the project group – disagreements and frictions which originated in different or even conflicting views of educational practice and team work. Yet, the participants remained enthusiastic and committed to the project – and also expressed a sincere interest in resolving problems and bridging miscommunication.

By studying communication within an intercultural project group, with a common goal (striving towards horizontality) and involving in dialogue in which horizontality is a tool, we have shown how cultural bias (differing academic training or variations in professional interaction) can obscure the horizontality of dialogue as well as how mismatches between espoused theories and theories-in-use can be manifested.

Returning to Argyris and Schön (1974); rarely do espoused theories completely coincide with the theories-in-use. The reflective dialogues suggested no significant variations in indexicality (i.e. understandings of MIHD). This is presumably explained by joint discussions during the seminar prior to the dialogues. The project partners', espoused theory (Argyris & Schön, 1974) was that the dialogues *ought to be* and indeed *were* horizontal, in structure and relation, perception and interaction (Janson, 2002). By contrast, their theory-in-use, as it manifested itself in the reflective dialogues, followed by the email correspondence, revealed occasional dialogue verticality, in 'structure' and 'relation' (due to gender and power variations), 'perception' (due to differing indexicality and cultural bias) and 'interaction' (due to varying levels of language competence among the partners).

Final remarks

Recognizing the vast cultural diversity characterizing humankind – is it even reasonable to search for general models of dialogue? Are not any of the aforementioned arguments underpinned by both explicit and implicit cultural values and ideological standpoints? This is exactly our core point: such a 'general' model enables us to detect and account for culture-specific peculiarities. Stated differently – it is a general model that allows for cultural relativism. By assisting people to extend beyond common preconceptions, reflective dialogues between teachers and pupils or among pupils may serve as tool to train pupils to negotiate meanings, or analyze what is said in a given communication situation. Reflective dialogues can also be used in teacher teams to analyze learning situations before 'taking measures', or in order to raise teachers' intercultural awareness.

Finally, globalization and an increasing domestic multiculturalism have multiplied intercultural interactions in daily life. For this reason, teacher educators need tools for managing this new, all human circumstance. In other words: a third theory, a 'mindful theory of practice', is needed which enables teachers to move themselves beyond espoused theory and theory-in-use. This can be achieved by offering them tools for systematic, critical reflection upon their professional practice. Such systematic and critical reflection is integral to what (Stier 2004b/2007) refers to as intercultural competence and reflective dialogues can raise intercultural awareness and minimize cultural bias among those who dare to challenge their own preconceptions.

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Notes

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² Sandström Kjellin, M. & Stier, J. (2008c) Practice What You Preach? – Managing Cultural (Un)awareness in a Multi-Cultural Collaborative Project. *The Learning Teacher Journal*.

³ In human communication, there are, of course, alternative means of communication (e.g. body language, prosody, or proxemics; Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999; Stier, 2004) that can be accounted for in analyses of human interaction in general and professional communication in particular.

⁴ This article will be included in the final report for the project.

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