

Guest editors' introduction

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This volume contains research-based articles written by the scholars participating in the project "Intercultural Communication in Educational Settings" conducted in the period 2013–2016. The project was funded by the Norwegian Center for International Cooperation in Education (SIU). It involved the activities of Russian and Norwegian academic and administrative staff at two universities – Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences and Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia. The main goal of the project group was designing and implementing a study course in Intercultural Communication in Educational Settings (15 ECTS) to be offered to the students of both universities. In addition, the project participants were engaged in the research of various issues concerning intercultural communication in educational settings, and there were two conferences held, one in Oslo and one in St Petersburg, devoted to these issues.

Both Russia and Norway have increasingly diverse and mobile populations, a fact which is mirrored in the educational systems. This has consequences for and sets certain requirements on the pedagogical practices used and on the content of the study programs. The need for cultural awareness and training in intercultural communication is constantly growing. It is thus important to reflect upon how to manage cultural differences and intercultural conflicts or the diverse nature of cultural aspects in educational settings. Intercultural competence becomes crucial both for reaching understanding and for interaction between different groups, and education becomes more and more oriented to meeting the goals of intercultural interaction.

It should be pointed out that both *intercultural communication* and *educational settings* are interpreted broadly in this volume. Intercultural communication is interpreted not only as interethnic communication but also as communication between diverse groups of people. Educational settings are interpreted as any context of formal, non-formal, and informal education, including public pedagogy.

The first article in this special issue, by Vera Berg, investigates the role of teacher students' international exchange programs in educating teachers for a multicultural society. The focus of her research is the teacher students' knowledge, thoughts, and feelings before and after their studies abroad as participants in the Erasmus Programmes. It is interesting that the students' motives for studying abroad turned out to be cultural and personal (to improve their foreign language proficiency, to visit another country, to experience life in a new environment, and personal development) rather than academic or pedagogical. After returning from their studies abroad, the exchange students confirmed the importance of these motives but also added the following outcomes, which they found relevant for them: a better cultural understanding, cultural and social experiences, new foreign friends, and a better knowledge of the country they visited. Another important finding is that according to the exchange students, before their participation in the exchange, almost all of them felt anxious, and 72% of the students said that the experiences gained during the study abroad encouraged them to work abroad in the future.

These outcomes, being related to intercultural communication competence, give evidence that study-abroad programs, particularly Erasmus, enhance the students' intercultural communication skills and prepare them for living and working in a multicultural world. Deliberating on the concepts of *multiculturalism* and *multicultural society*, Vera Berg comes to the conclusion that the participation in the Erasmus Programmes is of great relevance and value to the shaping of the next generations of teachers and citizens needed in a multicultural society.

Students experience anxiety before participating in the exchange programs, an anxiety that is caused by their awareness of the fact that they are to adjust to an educational context that is new to them and that has its norms and requirements as well as a foreign language of instruction. This context is also changing, and not only due to the flow of exchange students, who constitute only a part of the international population of a contemporary

university. As Elena Tkachenko, Kari Bratland, and Jorunn Johansen discuss in their article, the student population at a contemporary university today cannot be described as just consisting of "local" and "foreign" students, the latter conventionally being represented by exchange students. At present, according to their research conducted in Norway, even the terms, such as *L2 students*, *foreign students*, and *immigrant students*, need to be reconsidered and redefined, as for some of these students, the language of instruction might be not the second, but the third or even the fourth; they might be born in Norway or have a Norwegian citizenship but represent a different culture, that of their immigrant parents. Thus, a new term is suggested, *culturally diverse students*, meaning those who have previously had a culturally different educational experience. Higher-education institutions should meet the needs of these students and adjust their teaching methods to be more oriented to intercultural communication, that is, finding the ways not only of integrating but also of learning from this diversity. The authors analyze three learning activities illustrating some of the challenges experienced by culturally diverse students in different situations related to academic-literacy practices. The analyses demonstrate that the traditional language and academic writing courses are not enough for culturally diverse students to succeed in their studies and that cultural diversity brings about challenges not only for these students but also for the teaching staff. The authors call for a change in the attitude to culturally diverse students: instead of seeing them as a challenge, it is important to look for the opportunities these meetings with diversity provide for a critical view on the existing teaching practices and rules.

The third article in this special issue comes from a different educational context. Galina Shavard discusses public pedagogy and its contribution to multicultural education. Her research presented in this volume is a small-scale comparative study conducted in libraries, museums, and other sites of public education in Moscow and Oslo. Analyzing the educators' understanding of the role of public pedagogy and the potential and limitations of multicultural education in public-education settings, she documents how sites of public education, such as museums, libraries, and cultural centers, can be sites for the transformative and social-action approaches to multicultural pedagogy.

The next two articles in this special issue present pedagogical developmental work. One of them, by Victoria Pogosian, comes from a higher-education context. Her article discusses how one of the Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Power Distance, is perceived by pre-service and young in-service Russian teachers. The examples analyzed in the article provide evidence of how the large Power Distance in the Russian educational system manifests itself in different aspects of teaching and learning and how it influences the attitudes and values of the teachers and students.

The other article, by Olga Malova, deals with foreign-language education in a Russian primary-school context and discusses the benefits of using authentic materials in the teaching of foreign-language grammar. The teaching of grammar is a central part of foreign-language education in Russia, and quite often, the traditional methods of drilling and explicit grammar explanations are used for teaching grammar even for young learners. In her study, Olga Malova describes how authentic materials, like children's books and cartoons, can be used as innovative methods of grammar teaching. Her study provides evidence that young learners can effectively learn grammatical patterns from the authentic materials and that the use of such materials also has an additional value, namely, providing knowledge of the target-language culture.

One article in this volume comes from the educational context of deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Kristian Skedsmo discusses the discourses underlying deaf education in Norway and Russia. He claims that whereas in the Norwegian context, the deaf community using sign language as its first language, is seen as a cultural minority, the Russian discourse views the deaf population as disabled. As a consequence, different pedagogical practices are

used in deaf education. Kristian Skedsmo looks at the writings of Lev Vygotsky and Joseph Stalin and discusses how their ideas influenced and shaped the discourses about deaf education in the two countries.

As seen from this short introduction, the papers in this volume cover a broad specter of different perspectives on intercultural communication at various levels of education in the modern multicultural world. They might not provide so many ready-to-serve solutions to the challenges of intercultural communication, but they raise important questions and topics for discussion. Although the topics discussed are taken from the context of only two countries, Norway and Russia, we hope that they may be of interest for researchers and practitioners in other Scandinavian countries as well as internationally.