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Introduction to the Thematic Section: Intercultural Learning

One outcome of the transformation and maturity of academic disciplines is the emergence of new perspectives and concepts that encourage us to question and challenge rather than continuously recirculate traditionally accepted knowledge firmly entrenched in disciplinary 'canons'. Many scholars in the field of intercultural communication are today forcefully resisting the simplistic categories and dichotomies of people and cultures offered before the turn of the century by theorists such as Edward Hall (e.g. 1990) and Geert Hofstede (e.g. 2001) in favour of nuanced and critically informed perspectives. The 18th annual conference of the Nordic Network of Intercultural Communication (NIC) held at the University of Helsinki in 2011 focused on these divergent perspectives through the conference theme of 'Theoretical Turbulence'. Although 'turbulence' suggests trouble and points to a generational battle between the old canon and emerging perspectives within the field of intercultural communication (Poutiainen 2014), 'turbulence' can also suggest potentials that unleash ambiguity and wonder. From an educational perspective, 'turbulence' and its related associations to movement, wonder and ambiguity, offers a potentially powerful point of departure for learning (Tange 2014). The American educational philosopher John Dewey had already written on the importance of ambiguity for learning processes: "Thinking begins in what may fairly enough be called a forked-road situation, a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which proposes alternatives" (1910, p. 11).

If, according to Dewey, ambiguity leaves us in a 'forked-road' situation, then the themes of theoretical turbulence and the potential for turbulence to be a constructive force in reflective learning offer several directions. The committee behind the 19th annual conference of NIC that was held Aarhus University in 2012 were determined to follow a path highlighting the need to foreground intercultural pedagogies, diverse sites of learning, and the types and range of competences that have become necessary for students and professionals to acquire in order to engage as global citizens (Davies 2006) or as intercultural citizens (Jackson 2011). The theme of 2012 conference was 'Internationalization at Home – Contact, Communication and Change' and suggested how intercultural encounters inevitably cause us to think about who we are and how those perceptions place us in relation to others. Arguably, such reflections can and indeed should be used to raise intercultural awareness and strengthen our capacity to navigate in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. Professor Helen Spencer-Oatey from Warwick University struck this chord when she outlined a framework for developing 'Global Graduates' (Spencer-Oatey 2012) in her keynote lecture. One of the implications of negotiating complexity is that the field of intercultural communication can no longer be primarily concerned with the identification and categorization of 'difference', which has the tendency to drive people apart rather than bring them in closer proximity. Instead, the theme of intercultural learning rests on a more positive idea that international and multicultural organizations such as universities, NGOS and global firms be used as diverse sites to establish learning communities where participants accept ambiguity as a source of potential learning rather than a cultural barrier to be overcome.

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For this thematic issue of HERMES 53, we have invited five presenters from the 19th NIC conference to reflect on different aspects of intercultural learning and thus provide the reader with a potpourri of diverse contributions to reflect the diverse epistemological and representational approaches that mark the field of intercultural communication today. The conference theme of 'Internationalization at Home' is strongly reflected in the first three contributions that engage with multilingualism, multiculturalism and discursive constructions of 'difference' in international university settings. The two final contributions relate to the second part of the NIC conference theme on 'contact, communication, change' by engaging with the concepts of knowledge asymmetry and dignity and how they influence and structure intercultural learning, intercultural relations and intercultural competence.

In the first contribution '*Being bilingual means being a foreigner': Categorizing Linguistic Diversity among Students in Danish Higher Education*, **Anne Holmen** provides a literature review that serves to highlight the disparity between the ambitions of acknowledging plurilingualism as a valuable learning resource and the practice of categorizing and labeling students according to their linguistic background. By drawing on the differences that are created by university administration systems between international students and Danish minority students, the paper revisits the importance of viewing labelling processes as a sensitive issue in need of continued attention and proposes the need for developing multilingual pedagogical frameworks where students can benefit from their full language potential during their academic studies.

The backdrops of internationalization and the proliferation of the increasingly intercultural classroom are also used in the second contribution, *Changing Conceptions of the International Classroom and the Good Student?* by **Jane Vinther** and **Gordon Slethaug.** Using the statements of lecturers at a Danish and Canadian university generated through a questionnaire, the authors argue how lecturers' perceptions of the qualities and behaviour of 'the good student' cannot be seen in mono-dimensional terms but rather as influenced by their culturally distinct teaching philosophies and pedagogies. Contrasting Western, Humboldtian-rooted constructions of the 'good student' to Asian constructions of 'the good student' rooted in Confucian-heritage values, the authors argue that lecturers require a greater level of self-reflexivity of their own cultural philosophies in order to embrace the benefits of an internationalized pedagogy.

In the third contribution, *Discursive constructions of international education: how university lecturers 'talk' about international students*, **Peter Kastberg** and **Hanne Tange** explore the implications of the ways in which university teachers perceive and talk about international exchange students. The authors identify the discourses of 'transfer' and 'gap' as dominant in much of the literature on international education, which motivates their suggestion that the alternative notions of 'transformation' and 'asymmetry' be adopted instead. The underlying idea that lecturers contribute to the discursive construction of a particular idea of exchange students, is pursued in an analysis of statements made in 34 qualitative research interviews with lecturers involved in international education. This leads to a concluding discussion on how to address and possibly change the way teachers 'talk' about international exchange students.

In the contribution *Knowledge Asymmetry in Action,* **Ushma Chauhan Jacobsen** challenges extant understandings of knowledge asymmetries as static and stable conditions of difference that influence the processes of intercultural interactions that are designed to promote learning. The paper conceptualizes culture as knowledge and discusses contemporary understandings of intercultural communication that privilege sensitivies to the webs of geo-historical relations and macro power and economic asymmetries that structure and inform intercultural relationships. Drawing on data from ethnographic fieldwork at a training course on climate change attended by international development practitioners, the paper demonstrates how knowledge asymmetry emerges and disappears as participants summon, articulate, dismiss, ridicule, ignore or explore the rich pools of their culture/knowledge differences during the training course interaction.

The final contribution by **Steven Breunig**, *Realizing Dignity for Enhancing Intercultural Competence,* provides an elaboration on the concept of dignity and argues how dignity enables persons

to view the social world anew. The paper challenges instrumental views and approaches to intercultural competence and discusses how the realization of dignity should be seen as both developing the self-expression of persons ideally free from social categorization, and acknowledging that people are concretely vulnerable in the social and material world. The paper discusses research on social dynamics and emotional regulation and uses this to show how dignity may complement other strategies related to cognitive, behavioural and affective competence for engaging in effective and appropriate intercultural communication.

Our collection of contributions connects with both the old and the new. Although they circle around the concept of difference that continues to characterize the field of intercultural communication, they also connect to contemporary debates and issues that cause turbulence in the encounters of difference that take place in sites of learning. They suggest new insights, perspectives and directions for researchers by highlighting how the meaning of 'intercultural' may be questioned and renegotiated when taking into account issues such as institutional schemes for linguistic categorization, the impacts of culturally distinct teaching philosophies and pedagogies, home-team advantages in international higher education, the dynamic nature of knowledge asymmetries, and the role that dignity plays in enhancing intercultural competence.

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