University students’ intercultural interactions and attitudes: A person-in-multiple-contexts perspective

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I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.
This research explores the significance of context in university students’ experiences of intercultural interactions on- and off-campus, and attitudes towards culturally mixed learning activities. An original aspect is the adoption of a multi-layered and multiple context approach grounded in a “person-in-context” perspective (Volet, 2001; Pintrich, 2000). Inspired by central tenets from ecological psychology and activity theory, the research furthermore acknowledges the interdependence between individuals and their environment (e.g., Gibson, 1979/1986; Greeno, 1998). It construes individuals as located within multiple activity systems (Engeström, 2001) between which they move and participate, and which co-shape their intercultural interactions and attitudes.

The empirical component of the research emerged from the overwhelming evidence of minimal interactions and poor attitudes towards mixing between culturally diverse peers at universities in English-speaking countries. A review of the extant literature, however, revealed major limitations in the research designs and methodologies. Investigations of students’ intercultural experiences and perceptions of culturally mixed group learning activities typically used only one sample from a single context, a single point of data collection, and self-report data, either a questionnaire or interview. On the assumption that students participate simultaneously in multiple social contexts, it was argued that such methodologies have limited potential to reveal the complex, interdependent, and context-sensitive nature of intercultural experiences and attitudes. A particular aim of the present research was to address the lack of systematic investigations of the social context to explain paucity of intercultural interactions and poor attitudes to mixing on multicultural campuses. This implied conceptualising intercultural experiences and interactions as multi-dimensional...
and contextualised, adopting multi-layered and multiple context research designs, and carrying out empirical studies that combined quantitative methodologies for the identification of meaningful patterns, and qualitative methodologies for gaining experiential insight into these complex, social phenomena.

The findings revealed significant and powerful contextual affordances and constraints at multiple levels of the immediate (learning) environment for students’ experiences of culturally diverse group work and interactions. Contingent to a combination of contextual elements, students’ intercultural experiences were perceived and emerged differently within and across distinct social contexts. More specifically, cohort characteristics, language competency and level of academic standard were identified as salient facilitating or inhibiting factors for positive peer interactions and group management. One unexpected finding was that the culturally similar and close peer group seemed to represent an important social context that played a vital role in students’ openness and willingness to engage in interactions with peers from different backgrounds. The emotional risk of peer group disapproval when stepping out of the in-group to interact with ‘others’ was linked to fear of jeopardizing existing group memberships. These issues have been overlooked in prior research on intercultural interactions and have potential for contributing to a better understanding of the multi-faceted and interdependent nature of intercultural activities.

The research concludes by stressing the crucial role of the social context in co-shaping students’ intercultural experiences, and development of cognitions and attitudes. It is argued that the identification of patterns in students’ attitudes and experiences of interactions with peers from different cultural-educational backgrounds has to be interpreted in relation to the
immediate, social environment, and the specific contextual affordances and constraints within which interactions occur. In that regard, stable and narrow conceptualisations of the construct of intercultural interactions appear incompatible with the complex, interdependent and situation-specific nature of students’ intercultural activities on multicultural campuses.
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