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Beyond assumptions: Rethinking intercultural competence development in North–South virtual exchanges

Abstract

In today's globalised higher education landscape, intercultural competence (ICC) is essential, particularly for graduates engaging in virtual exchange programmes like Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). This paper challenges the assumption that such exchanges inherently foster ICC development, especially in North-South contexts. Critically assessing the limitations of prevalent self-assessment methods and Eurocentric frameworks, the paper argues for a nuanced understanding of ICC before assuming its occurrence in COIL projects. To address these gaps, alternative research approaches, including narrative research and art-based research (ABR), are proposed. These methods aim to redefine ICC within North-South relationships, moving beyond Eurocentric perspectives. By utilising narrative research and ABR, researchers can explore students' experiences in a more collaborative and empathetic manner, fostering dialogue and mitigating stereotypes. The paper contends that such alternative approaches are crucial for a more equitable understanding of ICC within North-South COIL projects, providing valuable insights into ICC development and assessment in a globalised educational landscape.

Keywords: *globalised higher education, intercultural competence (ICC), Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), North-South contexts, narrative research, art-based research (ABR)*

1. Introduction

In an ever-globalising world people increasingly engage in intercultural interactions. University graduates too need to learn how to function well in cross-cultural, liberal and technologically advanced societies (López-Rocha, 2021). This means that intercultural competence (ICC) has become important (Mourão, Gonçalves-Matos & Kik, 2022) in higher education to teach graduates to work effectively within multicultural teams and globalising markets. Additionally, enhancing intercultural understanding is vital as it is foundational for peace, global citizenship and achieving humanitarian aims (Deardorff, 2018). Research links ICC strongly to tolerance, cultural empathy, peace and the ability to reconcile global problems (Lopez-Rocha, 2021; O'Dowd, 2021).

Definitions of ICC vary but generally refer to as "an individual's ability to achieve communication goals while using appropriate communication behaviours to negotiate between different identities within a culturally diverse environment" (Portalla & Chen, 2010: 23). ICC also involves grasping the interconnectedness of global contexts, understanding diverse perspectives, and acting responsibly in multicultural settings (Lopez-Rocha, 2021: 119). Developing ICC is a deliberate, lifelong process requiring environments that promote reflection and intercultural engagement (Deardorff, 2016; Helm, 2017; O'Dowd, 2021; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020).

Ministries of Education and higher education institutions are introducing policies and programmes to promote internationalisation (Kubota, 2016). One form is "Internationalisation at Home", an umbrella term for internationalisation activities that take place on home campuses without a need for physical mobility (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). A prominent form of Internationalisation at Home[1] is virtual exchange, which is a technology-enabled, sustained collaborative, intercultural interaction between two or more culturally diverse and geographically separated groups of higher education students (Rubin, 2017; Zak, 2021).

One of the most popular forms of virtual exchange is collaborative online international learning (COIL). This approach connects students and classrooms around the world through short-term, co-taught, multicultural and blended online coursework that bridges physical distance and academic disciplines (Haug, 2017). Most crucial in such projects is synchronous or asynchronous collaboration between student groups aimed to develop ICC. Ideally, in real-time sessions, students would communicate across cultural and linguistic divides, collaboratively setting project goals, dividing tasks, and discussing each member's contributions. These interactions would challenge them to adapt to diverse communication styles, fostering openness, empathy, and adaptability—core elements of intercultural competence. Asynchronously, students would continue engaging with intercultural differences, respecting time zones and individual commitments. Through regular project updates and reflective check-ins, they could balance self-directed learning with group responsibilities, developing essential skills like flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and effective communication. In this envisioned model, academics facilitating COIL would play a key role in fostering intercultural competence by guiding collaboration. By setting clear expectations, encouraging inclusive communication, and valuing diverse perspectives, they would model intercultural skills. Ideally, academics would also help students navigate misunderstandings, transforming these into learning moments that enhance intercultural awareness.

COIL programmes are increasingly central to internationalisation strategies, designed to foster ICC, enhance employability, and encourage global mindsets, critical thinking, and diversity appreciation (Haug, 2017; Duffy *et al.*, 2022). Literature consistently links COIL to ICC development, and funding follows this claim. It is a well-established assumption that internationalisation, particularly through virtual exchange programmes like COIL, fosters ICC development (Hackett *et al.* 2023). COIL has become especially popular in collaborations between the global North and South, as physical exchanges are often unattainable for students in the global South. This trend includes a rise in South-South COIL partnerships, such as through the regional network, AFRICOIL, as well as the recent growth in European-South

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1   Internationalisation at Home integrates global perspectives into the campus environment to build intercultural competence for all students, including those unable to study abroad. It often involves inclusive classroom discussions, COIL, and virtual exchanges, which may also be embedded within Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC). IoC focuses on embedding international elements within academic content— using global case studies and diverse frameworks—to equip graduates with skills for cross-cultural and international contexts.

African projects partly due to the Erasmus+ funded iKudu project (iKudu, 2021). This paper will especially focus on ICC development within COILs that takes place within this international collaborative context. However, given the lack of comprehensive evaluations of ICC development, this paper critically questions what COIL projects can and do contribute to enhance ICC.

COIL is still a new topic of scholarship (Zak, 2021) and little empirical data exist to support the assumption it significantly enhances ICC development. Most literature focuses on detailed accounts of individual exchanges that discuss the planning, implementation, programmatic decisions and processes, curricula, benefits and challenges (Calcuianu, 2019; Helm, *et al.*, 2012). Strikingly, the bulk of research relies almost exclusively on self-reporting instruments, which run the risk of eliciting socially desirable responses. There are very few multimethod or longitudinal studies and most studies only focus on a single group of students (O'Dowd, 2018; Rubin & Guth, 2015; Rubin, 2017; Ruiz-Corbella & Álvarez-González, 2014). Additionally, researchers question the superficiality of the discourse, the exploration of culture only in a monolithic sense (Helm, 2018) and the potential to provide authentic cultural experiences (Lopez-Rocha, 2021). We therefore question the idea that providing students with an international experience 'automatically' translates into ICC development. We conclude that current scholarship does not offer an optimal basis to draw such a general conclusion. Empirical evidence that supports the assumption that COIL leads to ICC is lacking.

We also conclude that our current understanding of ICC and the assessment thereof is primarily based on literature and data which originate from the global North and do not necessarily reflect the dynamics of ICC within North-South COILs, as well as raise valid questions about their value and appropriateness within this context.

To address this knowledge gap, this paper will firstly lay a theoretical foundation for the discussion by unpacking the current understanding of ICC, its development and assessment within COIL. We will argue why it is problematic to assume that virtual exchange develops ICC, especially within a North-South relationship (hereafter referred to as the N-S relationship). We challenge both the existing assessment methods and the current understanding of ICC that predominantly reflect Northern perspectives and underscore the necessity of revising our understanding of ICC within North-South contexts before assuming its occurrence in COIL projects.

Finally, to address the limitations of current ICC research, we propose art-based research (ABR) as an alternative approach. ABR encompasses the use of creative arts in social research and human inquiry (Jones & Leavy, 2014). It can include various art forms like visual arts, audiovisual art, multimedia, narrative, poetic enquiry and performative art (Leavy, 2018). ABR can be employed throughout the research process and aims to approach research questions in an engaged and holistic manner (Leavy, 2020). While best suited for small sample sizes, it has the potential to yield rich datasets and generate new knowledge (Seppälä, *et al.*, 2021; Ferro, 2022). By rendering research findings into creative and affective forms, we want to explore if and how ABR can offer a form of knowledge production that brings new ways to understand complex social and cultural dynamics in online learning environments and elicit deep responses that traditional academic outputs may not easily achieve.

2. Unpacking intercultural competence

The field of ICC is characterised by conceptual ambiguity, with no universally accepted definition or theory associated with it (Lantz-Deaton & Golubeva, 2020). Instead, ICC is often viewed as a model, and Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) note that most ICC models typically incorporate three key elements: knowledge, attitude and skills/behaviour.

These elements consist of various competencies. Lantz-Deaton and Golubeva (2020) conclude that there are 300 intercultural competencies, which include openness, curiosity, empathy, tolerance of ambiguity, adaptability, suspending judgement, critical cultural self-awareness and cultural humility. ICC is therefore best understood as a multidimensional attribute (Barret, 2013; Lantz-Deaton & Golubeva, 2020). Following Lantz-Deaton and Golubeva's (2020) research. this paper draws on three models to ground its initial understanding and later critique surrounding ICC.

The first is Deardorff's model, which describes ICC as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes" (Deardorff 2006: 247). Deardorff explains that one must first gain new cultural knowledge (about their own and other cultures) to acquire new skills, which in turn leads to a change as one becomes more empathetic, adaptable and flexible in ICC encounters. Deardorff's model is often used, especially in relation to higher education (Commander, et al., 2022; Lantz-Deaton & Golubeva, 2020; Portalla & Chen, 2010). Notably, Lantz-Deaton and Golubeva (2020) argue that Deardorff's model emphasises the interaction itself and tends to neglect other aspects like challenging views, attitudes and discriminatory behaviours. We would also venture that Deardorff's model neglects to emphasise past and present inequalities and injustices and anti-hegemonic learning as described earlier.

To address some of this critique, a second model was developed by Barrett (2013: 152), who describes ICC as a collection of

> …values, attitudes, knowledge, understandings, skills and behaviours which are needed for: understanding and respecting people who are perceived to be culturally different from oneself; interacting and communicating effectively and appropriately with such people; and establishing positive and constructive relationships with such people.
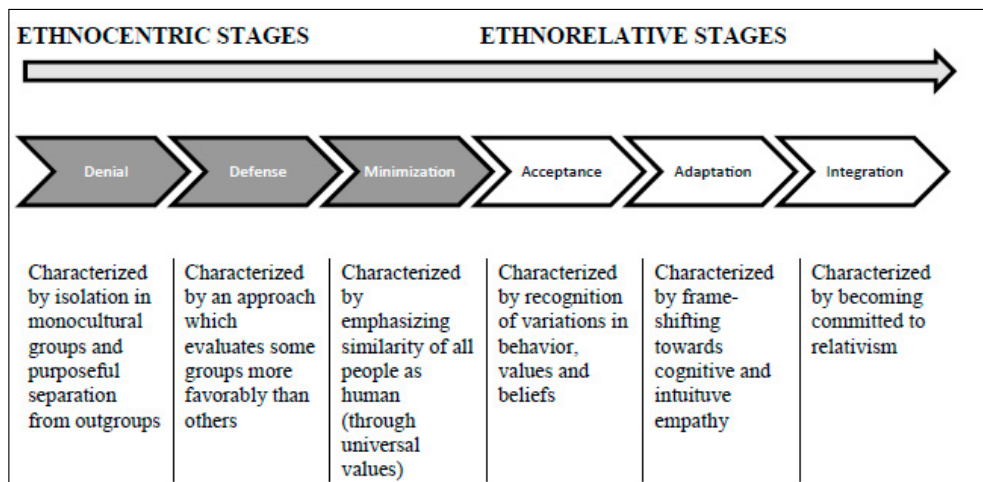
Barrett includes values, understandings and behaviour, and emphasises that ICC refers to understanding and respecting cultural differences and the importance of positive and constructive relationships. His model moves ICC from two-way communication to multi-faceted practices where ingrained discriminatory and exclusive behaviours are challenged.

Byram (1997) provides a slightly older, more comprehensive third model. He notes that attitude should include openness, curiosity and a readiness to suspend disbeliefs about other cultures and beliefs about one's own, and the ability to analyse from the viewpoints of others. Byram (1997) identifies two distinct types of skills. The first one he calls *Savoir comprendre*, which points to the ability to interpret documents and events from other cultures and to relate them to one's own culture. The second type, *Savoir apprendre,* are skills of discovery and interaction, which allow someone to acquire new knowledge and deploy knowledge, attitude and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction. Byram also adds elements of critical cultural awareness/political education to develop the ability to critically evaluate criteria, perspectives, practices and products within one's own and other cultures. This model is the closest to one that aligns with the definition of internationalisation provided above by Heleta and Chasi (2023).

All models clarify that developing ICC takes time, exposure and conscious effort in a lifelong, intentional developmental process (Deardorff, 2016; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020). One's success depends on attitude and predisposition but is otherwise a competency that needs to be honed like any other. The learning process will only take place in environments that purposefully facilitate this, led by facilitators who have been trained to design and lead virtual exchanges that support learners' ICC development (Deardorff, 2016; O'Dowd, 2021; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020; Helm & O'Dowd, 2020). Being an educator does not automatically imply that one is able to facilitate ICC development (Beelen, 2014; Deardorff, 2016; Helm & O'Dowd, 2020). Neither exposure to other cultures or experience of differences, nor mere cognitive understanding automatically results in ICC (Deardorff, 2016). It is not a "natural by-product" of internationalisation or virtual exchange (Helm & O'Dowd, 2020: 4). Kramsch (2014: 98) supports this conclusion when she argues that online intercultural exchange should move away from superficial "surfing of diversity", and rather facilitate thorough engagements with and negotiation of difference.

2.1 Developing intercultural competence

Although there are multiple theories and models of ICC development, we found the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) by Bennett (1993; 1986) as one of the most comprehensive ones. Bennet's model outlines ICC development as a spectrum that moves from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. Ethnocentrism is the perception that one's own culture is the central or superior culture. Ethnocentric people tend to view the world primarily through the lens of their own race, ethnicity or culture. Ethnorelativism is described by Lantz-Deaton and Golubeva (2002) as contextualising one's own culture within other cultures in which other cultures are seen as equally valid. Ethnorelative stages involve "looking for cultural difference by accepting that it is relevant, by adapting to it, or by integrating difference into one's own identity" (Lantz-Deaton & Golubeva, 2002: 123)

ETHNOCENTRIC STAGES   **ETHNORELATIVE STAGES**

Denial	Defense	Minimization	Acceptance	Adaptation	Integration
Characterized by isolation in monocultural groups and purposeful separation from outgroups	Characterized by an approach which evaluates some groups more favorably than others	Characterized by emphasizing similarity of all people as human (through universal values)	Characterized by recognition of variations in behavior, values and beliefs	Characterized by frame-shifting towards cognitive and intuitve empathy	Characterized by becoming committed to relativism

Figure 1: Developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (copied from Lantz-Deaton & Golubeva, 2020)

Bennett's model does not imply that ICC development is a linear process. It is possible for a person's ICC to regress and in fact move backwards on the spectrum. The underlying assumption of this model is that with increased experience of cultural difference, a person moves from a monocultural worldview to a view where different cultures are equally valid (Hammer, *et al.*, 2003). It falls beyond the scope of this paper to fully discuss Bennett's model or the criticism it received. However, it makes us realise that within all virtual exchange (hereafter referred to as VE) groups there will be students who function at diverse stages. The model emphasises the complexity of ICC development and the concerted effort it takes to enhance ICC development.

2.2 Assessment of intercultural competence

The discussion thus far illustrates that ICC is a complex process requiring concentrated, intentional efforts, raising the question: Why does HE assume ICC development 'naturally' occurs through VE? While VE impacts ICC development, we argue that current research does not justify the assumption that it is a 'natural' by-product.

One reason for doubt is the contentious nature of ICC assessment. Over one hundred ICC assessment tools exist (Deardorff, 2016), from free, self-report instruments to costly corporate assessments conducted by third parties, with concerns about their validity and objectivity (Deardorff, 2009; 2012; 2016; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020).

The primary critique is that subjective assessment methods likely result in socially desirable responses (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007), hindering self-report validity (Lanz, *et al.*, 2022). Paulhus (1991) identifies two drivers of socially desirable responses: (1) gaining a positive reputation and (2) maintaining a positive self-image. This tendency is especially prominent in assessments related to prosocial behaviour (Lanz *et al.*, 2022). ICC assessment tools, which assume prosocial skills, often lend themselves to prosocially biased answers.

Recently, at least 11 impact reports on VE have been released, including SUNY COIL (Guth & Helm, 2017), Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (Helm & Van der Velden, 2018, 2019; 2020), Evolve Project Team (2019, 2020; Nissen & Kurek, 2020), and the Stevens Initiative (2019; 2020). O'Dowd (2021) confirms that self-assessments indicate student-reported gains in cultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes. However, there is little critical reflection on empirical support for these conclusions. We argue that while participants' perceptions matter, self-reports are too limited a basis for solid conclusions about VE outcomes. O'Dowd (2021) observes in two reports that "students' empathy levels…did not develop significantly during the VE" (218), cautioning against reliance solely on self-reports.

Other studies, including Bassani and Buchem (2019), Dooly (2017), Hackett *et al.* (2023), Jager *et al.* (2019), Lee and Song (2019), O'Dowd and Lewis (2016), Oviedo and Krimphove (2022), Commander *et al.* (2022), Steven's Initiative (2022) are also based on self-reports, with many authors acknowledging this as a limitation. Commander *et al.* (2022) recommend further research combining quantitative and qualitative methods.

Our position is not that self-reports are fundamentally flawed but that using them alone to assess socially desirable attitudes and skills is insufficient. Self-reports should be paired with other methods for deeper insights into ICC development.

3. The principles of selecting ICC assessment tools

A further critique, especially pertinent to North-South collaborations, is the lack of research on the cross-cultural relevance of most ICC assessment methods (Deardorff, 2009; 2012; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020). We concur with this critique, which raises doubts about claims regarding ICC development in COIL. However, we agree with Deardorff that there is no single correct or superior method to measure ICC (Deardorff, 2017). She outlines five principles for selecting an assessment protocol, including (1) defining the focus, (2) prioritising specific ICC elements, and (3) aligning assessments with learning outcomes. The following discussion illustrates how North-South COILs have not yet advanced beyond the first principle.

While Deardorff's principles are valuable, this paper does not aim to create an alternative assessment. Rather, her principles are a starting point for exploring ICC dynamics in North-South COILs. Until recently, higher education internationalisation discussions have often overlooked global North dominance, Eurocentric curriculum influence, and disparities between universities in the North and South (Montgomery & Trahar, 2023). This imbalance is reflected in ICC assessment. We believe that a shift in focus could enable rethinking of ICC elements and developing innovative assessment methods suited to North-South contexts, aligning with the definition of internationalisation in section two.

3.1 The North–South context

The five principles by Deardorff follow a sequence: first, we must precisely define what we aim to assess. This initial clarity allows for prioritizing specific ICC elements in the assessment, ensuring alignment with measurable learning outcomes that reflect expected student changes. Defining ICC requires recognising that it encompasses diverse competencies rather than a single definition, as discussed in section three. Clear articulation of ICC competencies in a specific context is thus crucial.

Here, our focus is on the North-South relationship, though the predominant understanding of ICC has been shaped using methodologies, ideas, and definitions originating from the global North. This is evident in the fact that all thirty-two existing ICC assessment tools, per Griffith *et al.* (2016), originate from global North researchers, with no recent developments in the global South.

Similar concerns are presented by Heleta and Chasi (2023) regarding the definition of internationalisation, which is the foundation of COIL, within the context of the global South and specifically South Africa. The generally accepted definition of internationalisation is provided by De Wit and Altbach (2015:281):

> …the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society.

Heleta and Chasi (2023) critique this definition through a North-South lens, emphasising economic, social, and ideological divides rooted in colonial histories and neocolonial dynamics. A decolonial approach reveals how global North definitions of internationalisation perpetuate eurocentrism and coloniality in South African higher education, poorly suited to post-apartheid transformation goals. The global South, particularly South Africa, where higher education decolonisation is a national priority, demands a reconceptualisation of internationalisation

and related ideas. Other scholars (Bamberger *et al.*, 2019; Montgomery & Trahar, 2023; Whitsed *et al.*, 2021) have similarly raised concerns regarding the Anglo-European nature of internationalisation. These concerns and the adapted understanding form a basis for the concerns we raise regarding ICC. Heleta and Chasi (2023: 269-270) propose a new definition of internationalisation:

> Internationalisation of higher education is a critical and comparative process of the study of the world and its complexities, past and present inequalities and injustices, and possibilities for a more equitable and just future for all. Through teaching, learning, research engagement, internationalisation fosters epistemic plurality and integrates critical, antiracist and anti-hegemonic learning about the world from diverse global perspectives to enhance the quality and relevance of education.

We believe that this definition is more appropriate, because it goes beyond the inclusion of global dimensions and greatly emphasises the importance of the complex history of colonialism and other oppression and its enduring legacy within the present. Heleta and Chasi's (2023) definition also addresses the absence of any mention of anti-hegemonic learning in De Wit's description. Similarly, we believe that questions around hegemony and power is a cornerstone of ICC in a country like South Africa, where people actively question the value of the Eurocentric canon and acknowledge, grapple and critically interrogate the inequalities, both past and present, to change the landscape and ultimately make a meaningful contribution to a more just society. This reality particularly affects exchanges within North-South partnerships.

Heleta and Chasi (2022: 264) write that "the purpose of colonial and neocolonial domination in the sphere of knowledge was to control the ways of knowing". We believe that many of the assessments used today – perhaps unintentionally – continue this control in knowing and knowledge production, simply because they are singularly developed within a Eurocentric understanding. Whether these assessments are appropriate for COILs within N-S relationships is yet to be appraised. It is clear that our understanding of North-South collaborations and student experiences in post- and/or decolonial contexts within COIL projects is under-researched. Given this reality, we believe that we therefore cannot move beyond Deardorff's first principle, as we are still trying to define contextually what we want to assess.

This raises the question of how to characterise North-South contexts. In this regard, we wish to revisit Heleta and Chasi's (2023) questions regarding internationalisation and argue that our understanding of ICC and its development should similarly encompass an exploration of the world's complexities, historical and present disparities, and injustices. Furthermore, we need to envision a more equitable and just future while promoting epistemic diversity through critical, antiracist, and anti-hegemonic perspectives from diverse global viewpoints. These objectives align with a growing body of research on the intersection of internationalisation and decolonisation (Du Preez, 2018; Heleta & Chasi, 2023; Montgomery & Trahar, 2023; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).

For ICC and related endeavours in North-South partnerships to become more valued with the global South, we believe that they would have to be constructed within frameworks of perceived power relations that acknowledge that they were founded in oppressive colonial heritage, neocolonialism, stereotypes and social imaginaries. Within the South African context, there is also a further enduring legacy of colonial and Apartheid privilege and oppression (Cornell, et al., 2019). Any attempt to understand and assess ICC development must be

robust enough to deal with the fraught context. We believe the same is largely true within other N-S collaborations. Similar arguments were previously raised by Steyn and Reygan (2017: 86), who argue that the understanding of ICC must "be underpinned by cognisance of the need to redress often-traumatic economic and political processes that are both contemporary and historical and the moral imperative to engage in a renegotiation of personal subjectivities shaped within such relations". The same can be said of how ICC assessment is approached. Similar to the requirements identified by Steyn and Reygan (2017) for ICC conceptualisation, we believe that both the development and the assessment of ICC in South African contexts should:

- Be founded in narrative changes in students

- Address Eurocentrism

- Acknowledge the unique colonial legacy of the specific Global South country

However, our current knowledge of these changes in student narratives is limited, making it challenging to achieve a more comprehensive and appropriate assessment of what students have learned through the exchange. Really assessing this is indeed complicated and we do not claim that there is a singular "perfect" solution for how ICC understanding and assessment should account for regarding the abovementioned dimensions of ICC development. We also recognise that suggestions to that end cannot be universally applicable in all contexts of ICC development.

Nonetheless, we argue that within North-South contexts, as a starting point, we should consider moving away from relying primarily on quantitative measures for assessment. The current attempts to quantify and have students self-assess do not align sufficiently with a critical understanding of ICC within North-South exchanges. While reducing the use of quantitative methods may hinder faster assessment with larger groups, it would be valuable to explore first how COIL can shed light on, address, and potentially reshape the narratives that students hold regarding the North-South relationship. This requires a better understanding of students' stories. In line with this, Maxwell (2001: 1) describes culture as "the sum of stories we tell ourselves about who we are and want to be, individually and collectively". We find further support for our idea with Steyn and Reygan (2017: 86), who write that we need to "conceptualise and offer spaces of communicative possibility – possibilities that enable ways of knowing and being that work through, and ultimately transcend, historical divisions, and the wounds of epistemic violence". Rather than reducing ICC as the mastery of a list of set universal objectives, we need to acknowledge that student experiences in international exchanges are integrated in a lifetime of generational narratives, experiences and social imaginaries that form the foundation with which we approach and experience others.

4.   Alternative approaches in North–South contexts

Given the current knowledge gap as articulated above, we support the use of narrative research, which is, of course, not an entirely new concept within ICC assessment. Leavy (2020: 43) explains that narratives:

> …allow us to express and comprehend individuals, cultures, societies, and historical periods in their wholeness … Stories enable us to imagine what is and what might be. The power of stories – of narrative – is immeasurable and profoundly entrenched in our humanity".

While narrative and self-evaluation are both reflective processes, they often serve different purposes which are used in distinct ways in research and practices. Narratives involve telling a story, often about a sequence of events or experiences. They describe experiences, explore meanings, and make sense of personal or collective events over time. In research, narratives are generally used to convey rich, contextual insights into individual or group experiences, which capture subjective meanings, emotions, and social contexts. Self-evaluation, on the other hand, is an introspective assessment of one's own actions, achievements, or areas for improvement. Her the focus is on gauging one's own effectiveness, skills, or progress in relation to specific criteria or goals. Self-evaluation is commonly used to reflect on one's performance, assess progress, or to set goals for personal improvement.

Narrative research allows us to engage more collaboratively with research participants and to avoid objectifying them whilst "preserving the complexity of human experience" (Josselson, 2006: 72). Narrative research offers a way to reveal multidimensional meanings and "present an authentic and compelling rendering of the data" (Leavy, 2020: 77).

Strikingly, and for various reasons, current assessments do not necessarily explore narratives in depth, the obvious being the time and resources that are required to do this. However, we believe that if we would take time to conduct this type of research, it can eventually inform the development of assessment tools for the N-S context that will be able to conduct larger-scale assessments. Within this context, we strongly believe we should consider the value of art-based research as a method to elicit and analyse narratives.

4.1 Art–based research (ABR) in narrative inquiry

By integrating visual methods into narrative inquiry, some may question whether ABR offers added value, as both approaches aim to achieve similar reflective and expressive outcomes. However, within North-South (NS) exchanges, we argue that ABR can provide participants with additional unique, and self- directed opportunities to share their experiences as stakeholders in the process. This autonomy allows them to express their own stories without predefined categories or assumptions, which is a crucial feature when one develops intercultural competency.

Prominent figures in art education have long recognised the potential of ABR. Notably, Eisner (1991, 1994, 2002), often along with Barone (2012) highlighted how aesthetic experiences can provide nuanced understandings by fostering cognitive and emotional depth which is often overlooked by more traditional methods. Their work, along with that of McNiff (1998), who frames art as a powerful and legitimate means of inquiry, demonstrates ABR's potential to enrich qualitative inquiry. McNiff advocates artistic exploration as a valuable route to self-expression, by emphasising art's capacity to access embodied and experiential knowledge that goes beyond words. Building on these ideas, Coessens, Crispin, and Douglas (2009) make a compelling case for the transformative impact of integrating artistic practices into research, and position art as a critical contributor to the pursuit of knowledge. Their claim is supported by Sullivan (2010) who frames artmaking as a distinctive inquiry method. He views ABR as particularly transformative in education by creating creative, reflective learning environments. Leavy (2020) further argues that ABR's strength lies in its capacity to foster dialogues that cultivate empathy and understanding, which is vital when one challenges stereotypes and aim to build understanding across difference:

> The arts ideally evoke emotional responses, and so the dialogue sparked by arts-based practices is highly engaged. ("Recipes on Arts-Based Research Practice as a Form of Feminist ...") By connecting people on emotional and visceral levels, artistic forms of representation facilitate empathy, which is a necessary precondition for challenging harmful stereotypes (pertinent in identity research) and building coalitions/community across differences (pertinent in action research and other projects with activist components). (Leavy, 2020:54).

Moreover, ABR's flexible interpretative approach potentially also democratises meaning-making processes, as there is no single authoritative reading of an artwork. By decentralising the researcher's role as a primary interpreter, ABR can enable participants to shape their own narratives and guide how their experiences are represented, and thus counteract research practices that might impose a Eurocentric lens. This adaptability is particularly valuable in NS collaborations, where decolonising research practices and critiquing Eurocentric epistemologies are important (Beelen *et al.*, 2020; Seppälä *et al.*, 2021).

Decolonisation calls for methods that challenge colonial power structures by embracing diverse epistemic perspectives (Mbembe, cited in Seppälä *et al.*, 2021). By facilitating students to share their stories in ways that are meaningful to themselves, ABR could mitigate the dominance of a Eurocentric lens. Decolonisation involves critiquing Eurocentric knowledge reproduction in Western epistemologies by embracing methodologies that foreground the perspectives of the colonised (Seppälä *et al.*, 2021). As stakeholders in the process, researchers must be wary to avoid relying on Eurocentric "theoretical orthodoxies and infrastructures" that maintain power structures (Seppälä *et al.*, 2021, p. 19). By allowing participants from varied backgrounds to lead the interpretive process, ABR acknowledges their diverse cultural identities. ABR thus offers a potential pathway to bridge divides by fostering openness to dialogue among different epistemic positions (Mbembe, cited in Seppälä *et al.*, 2021, p. 39). As Leavy (2020) suggests, ABR's role in identity research enables participants to share experiences around diversity and prejudice. Moreover, this approach aligns with storytelling traditions and oral knowledge transmission practices in many indigenous Southern African cultures.

While ABR offers transformative potential, it also comes with challenges, as Seppälä *et al.* (2021) caution against idealising the method. Despite ABR's democratising aims, it is not immune to power imbalances or hierarchies, particularly in NS contexts which involve former colonial powers and previously colonised nations. Researchers must remain vigilant of their own biases to prevent taking over participants' voices and acknowledge that power dynamics cannot be eliminated. This awareness is essential when navigating colonial histories and fostering genuine decolonisation efforts in these partnerships. Seppälä *et al.* (2021) therefore recommend to approach ABR with caution and note that unintended hierarchies and (re)colonisation can arise if these dynamics go unexamined. Critics also argue that ABR may be too subjective, but this concern often stems from positivist criteria that differ from those used in ABR. Following Leavy (2020), we view ABR's subjective, interpretive qualities as strengths, which can enrich research with more nuanced, and multifaceted insights into complex social questions.

ABR within a COIL project

Seppälä's caution regarding ABR is particularly relevant in COIL partnerships involving former colonial and colonised states, where renegotiating colonial heritage is crucial for equitable collaboration. Within a COIL project, ABR's participatory nature raises ethical concerns

around representation, cultural sensitivity, and participant autonomy, especially as ABR often involves sensitive topics, which can create dilemmas about consent, ownership, and privacy. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999; revised 2012) criticised certain ABR practices for perpetuating exploitative dynamics, particularly within marginalised communities, emphasising the need for culturally sensitive and ethical methodologies, especially within decolonial and Indigenous research frameworks.

Notably, ABR has yet to be widely applied in COIL studies, limiting empirical insights into its effectiveness for diverse knowledge forms and digital communication. Thus, there is limited insight into how ABR could foster intercultural exchange and representation in virtual settings, especially in supporting plural perspectives and culturally sensitive interactions. However, drawing on ABR research in other educational contexts, we anticipate that integrating ABR within virtual collaborative learning could yield valuable insights.

Following Leavy (2020), we ensure participants receive clear instructions, particularly about theme and medium, and emphasise choosing methods suited to COIL's research aims and accessible to all participants, regardless of artistic skill level (Ferro, 2022; Seppälä *et al.*, 2021). Here, digital photography and collage-making, especially using mobile phones, provide effective ABR approaches. Collages, as compilations of various digital or physical images, create cohesive expressions that convey messages beyond their individual components, with the media either self-created or collected online. Collages can foster new understandings, reveal connections among diverse elements, and encourage layered knowledge (Leavy, 2020; Roberts & Woods, 2018; Vaughan, 2005). Leavy (2020: 272) notes that collages "often bring disparate elements together" and can promote cultural critique, connect previously unrelated ideas, suggest new associations, or refine meanings.

For future ICC research, we propose students create collages illustrating their perceptions of a specific theme linked to dominant North imaginaries and their positioning within them, then share personal analyses to unlock narratives and enrich theme analyses (Leavy, 2020). Although images are not neutral and do not represent a single truth, collage participants can convey intentional meaning. Combining images and words supports self-awareness and individual narrative expression (Seppälä *et al.*, 2021). This, combined with a passive interview technique where "non-interruption" is practised, positions participants as experts of their own lives and narratives and as co-producers of the knowledge within the research endeavour (Jones, 2003). Non-interruption is, for example, when a researcher starts with a narrative-inducing question and then allows the participant to tell the narrative without interruption and only with appropriate visual clues such as nodding (Leavy, 2020).

In this approach, following their COIL experience, students would revisit their original collages, potentially reframing them, grounded within knowledge and/or attitude changes. This process, known as re-storying, is "a process whereby participants narrativise their stories through the interplay between cultural frames (available) and individual meaning (which changes over time)" (Harvey *et al*., 2000: 307). There might be no change, a subtle change, or perhaps a complete shift in perception. However, research findings based on this approach could offer valuable insights into ICC within the North-South context, informing its definition and prioritisation. We suggest the use of art-based research primarily as a method to obtain more in-depth knowledge about ICC, which can subsequently inform new ways to assess ICC and ICC development in students.

One issue that needs to be tackled is the language used throughout the narrative research process. Ideally it would be to conduct narrative enquiry in the language in which the student is the most comfortable. The use of a common language, and especially English, brings with it a myriad of power relations (Mitchell & Succi, 2021). This is acknowledged with no perfect solution currently. While challenging to implement, researchers should aim to ensure participants feel adequately comfortable engaging in English for the assessment.

5. Conclusion

In a globalised world, the need for interculturally competent graduates is clear and is prominently reflected in higher education (HE) policy frameworks. Under internationalisation, HE asserts that virtual exchange programmes like COIL effectively ensure ICC development. At a superficial level, it may appear that contact with other cultures naturally equips one to interact with them. However, this paper argues that there is a stark difference between "playing well with others" and the complex process of ICC development. It examines critiques of the assumption that international exchanges inherently foster ICC, especially in North-South contexts, yet acknowledges that this belief remains widely held.

We contend that this assumption requires a more substantiated basis through comprehensive research and a renewed understanding of ICC. A significant limitation in current research is the primary reliance on self-assessment, which risks socially desirable responses and reflects only a surface understanding of ICC. Additionally, assessments often lack cultural relevance for the global South, given their Eurocentric origins, raising questions about their value within North-South contexts. The dominant IoHE definition, emphasising international dimensions, has been criticised for perpetuating Eurocentrism, contrasting with Heleta and Chasi's call for a critical, comparative approach that addresses historical inequalities and envisions a more just future. This paper illustrates that a deeper, context-specific understanding of ICC in North-South contexts is essential before assuming ICC development within COIL projects.

Addressing limitations in current ICC understanding, we suggest alternative research approaches to explore ICC dynamics in North-South COILs. Guided by Deardorff's principles, our focus was on defining ICC within specific North-South relationships and adopting plural global perspectives beyond a singular Eurocentric view. Narrative research offers a collaborative and empathetic approach to student experiences in North-South contexts. Using art-based research methods like collages can empower participants to share stories, fostering dialogue and mitigating stereotypes.

Through narrative research and ABR, researchers may identify shifts in students' narratives and views on North-South relations post-COIL, offering fresh insights into ICC development and potentially informing a redefinition of ICC competencies. We propose that culturally sensitive, power-aware assessment approaches are critical to fostering an equitable understanding of ICC. This research could also address how ABR navigates contextual challenges and power imbalances in North-South partnerships—a topic to be explored in a forthcoming article.

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