

Promoting democratic practice through the Diversity Icebreaker in multicultural student groups

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Introduction

This paper discusses how an integrated approach to diversity in classrooms can create a collective understanding of learning processes among culturally diverse students, thus creating democratic practice in the classroom by providing equal chances for learning. By exploring culturally based learning beliefs, we address the challenge that cultural diversity among university students in major European countries presents. In particular we focus on the egalitarian integration of Asian students in group learning processes. Secondly, we consider how a better understanding of students' ideals and beliefs of what constitutes good learning allows European professors to recognize Asian students' learning efforts. Thirdly, we discuss how these approaches are practically applied using the Diversity Icebreaker, a one to two-hour training and developmental concept that assesses individual cognitive differences, empowers group processes and permits a locally and socially constructed understanding of learning differences. This approach promotes trust, open communication as well as active and egalitarian participation in the classroom. We have previously engaged in pedagogical trials combining these perspectives with empirical research (Rossi, van Egmond & Ekelund, 2010a; 2010b; 2011). This presentation will provide a research update within the context of democracy in education, including a discussion of the main processes of democratic practice promoted by the use of this integrated approach that combines Diversity

Icebreaker with the development of student cultural competencies and values. Our aim is to incorporate ideas of integration and learning in culturally diverse student groups into the broader perspective of democratic learning.

Democratic practice

Democracy has traditionally been understood as a political system where the majority rules, in contrast to authoritarian systems where one leader decides (Oxford dictionary, 2013). Today's issues regarding democracy extend beyond questions of institutional frames and may adhere to promoting social involvement and compensating practices due to explicit and implicit power systems. This broader meaning of the term is well reflected in the Rockefeller Brothers Fund's guidelines for democratic practice described as: "For democracy to flourish and deliver on its promises (...), citizens must be informed, engaged, empowered, and assertive. Similarly, institutions of governance must be inclusive, transparent, accountable, and responsive." (Rockefeller Brothers Fund, 2007-2012) A report on democracy from IDEA (2006) states: "There is a need for democratic practice: besides and above the indispensable formal institutional framework, the legitimacy and sustainability of democratic systems are perceived as depending increasingly on the responsible exercise of power and on giving voice to those who feel marginalized."

In line with these more advanced and institutionalized democratic practices, various societal initiatives relevant for democratic practice have been introduced into educational systems that go beyond the simpler notion that the majority rules. One example of a school seeking to actively engage students through a highly developed democratic practice that focuses on empowering them is a school in Connecticut, USA. The defining of the role of the student, as well as who the student is, reflects this notion.

Students are active citizens who make authentic connections between learning and life. They take responsibility for their own learning and behaviour, invite and include contributions

from all other students, are actively engaged in assessing their learning and in goal setting. They take pride in and are eager to share their work and the work of their peers, and they use higher order thinking skills to support choice, participation, connection and contribution to the school community.

State of Connecticut, 2002-2013

At the same time the school also defines the role of the teacher, the person that in the classroom has more influence and institutional continuity, in a democratically inclusive way that is in line with and supports the student as an active partner in the learning process.

Teachers model active citizenry and a commitment to personal professional growth and they take responsibility for their own actions and for their personal growth. Accomplished teachers serve as mentors to other teachers. Teachers empower students to make authentic connections between learning and life, and to take responsibility for their own learning. They provide opportunities for students to define shared values and set goals individually and collaboratively.

State of Connecticut, 2002-2013

Addressing accountability within the different roles of influence in order to create a shared culture of learning is an essential element of creating a democratic classroom environment. In our ideas further on, the practice of the teacher's as facilitators as well as the interaction between the students, are important elements. Concerning the change in cultural background with international students, being the cultural visitors to an academic context, adds dimensions to the complexity that is already present in the classroom. Both students and teachers alike are often unaware of their cultural values. The awareness for any differences thus also only emerges in cross-cultural interaction. Furthermore, the assimilation strategy where students conform to social and learning norms in the classroom, without making cultural specific values explicit, will most often favour local and majority practices, resulting in a situation where an incomer's competence for voicing one's own perspectives does not fit the local cultural norms for

determining a success. Doing this without transparency and awareness of these differences is not a respectful democratic practice. Not developing specific skills in order to empower all students and to create a balanced interaction for a participatory, inclusive learning practice, is a lost opportunity. Therefore we are interested in establishing processes to develop understanding and recognition of values and competences that can be used to create a democratic university classroom where all students can be involved, involve others and take part in a joint and respectful exchange of ideas. This effort is particularly relevant to academic learning settings, due to the trend towards internationalization and world-wide academic exchange. For the OECD area, it is for example estimated that the number of international students will continue to increase worldwide until 2030 and beyond. Students from Asia, and particularly China, form the largest group of international students (OECD, 2010).

In order to gain the maximum benefits from this diversity, i.e. to manage diverse classroom environments effectively and to assure the high quality of higher education offered, it is crucial to thoroughly understand the cultural embeddedness of beliefs about learning and the way that these beliefs affect behavioural tendencies in the classroom. We state that understanding the relevant cultural dimensions for learning in the classroom learning processes, is just as important as understanding the diversified background of relevant experience and scientific perspective in innovation processes and must be managed just as precisely in order to maximize the benefits of diversity. For example, in the area of international management literature there is a growing tendency for prioritizing innovation and productivity instead of seeking adaptation and fit between local posts and the headquarters. The trend of not accepting arguments that are based on local traditions but instead seeking integrative and new solutions based upon the variety of historical and cultural experience (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989) is also on the rise. We see that in transnational companies people are organized in teams from different cultures in order to create more innovation and efficiency based upon diversified competencies, resources and perspectives. Our suggestion is that this practice can also be applied

to multicultural student groups. This is especially relevant now, when learning processes are changing from individual, teacher- and book-centred learning to collective information seeking and knowledge creation involving students and teachers from local and distant cultures. At the same time, organizing multicultural teams remains a challenge, and 'playing' with diversity can be a double-edged sword (Lane, et al. 2004), where differences and similarities have to be managed carefully. Therefore the processes of uniqueness and sharedness should be combined in order to establish a common platform for interaction as well as to explore and creatively use culturally based knowledge about diversity (Ekelund, 2009).

In multicultural teams a higher degree of diversity and complexity is expected due to the different backgrounds of their members (Lane et al, 2005). The challenge is to create the shared understanding that is required to identify and predict how people and ideas will be treated. The idea of a "team mental model" was developed to account for the implicit coordination that had been observed in effective teams and to advance the understanding of how teams function in complex, dynamic, and ambiguous situations (Cannon-Bowers, Salas & Converse, 1993). "Team mental model" refers to the team members' shared and organized mental understanding of the key elements of the team's environment (Klimoski & Mohammed, 1994). Research suggests that a team mental model consists of at least two dimensions: team mental model convergence (or sharedness) and team mental model accuracy (Rentsch & Hall, 1994). In educational settings with multicultural students, the sharedness and accuracy can be achieved through answering the question: "How do we learn together?" Thus, establishing answers and norms through a managed process in an educational setting is similar to what is in the management literature about organizational cultures (Deal & Kennedy, 1981; Schein, 1993; Morgan 1984). Within the process of effectively managing diversity in a democratic manner, it is important to make the process, roles and expectations explicit and have transparency during the creation of a shared experience or even a "third culture", from which all members can then operate together and on the same level. For example, within the "third culture" devel-

opment framework, Matoba claims that team-members should agree on a cognitive diversity model for interaction, before immersing into the processes of exploring identity and informational diversities, e.g. cultural learning beliefs (2011). This has been illustrated in numerous reflection reports from students in multicultural groups where the Diversity Icebreaker has constituted the common ground before going into collective entrepreneurial learning processes (Matoba & Ekelund, 2014). Instead of asking the minority students with non-dominant learning beliefs to assimilate, we see that the creation of a shared understanding of differences can be utilized within the process of creating a “third culture” concept (Matoba, 2011).

We suggest applying the categories of Red, Blue and Green, as used in the Diversity Icebreaker seminar, as a shared cognitive diversity model, or a “team mental model”, in order to enhance the understanding of how to utilize the diversity of cultural learning beliefs in the classroom. We also believe that the process of finding these answers is a generic competence that will be increasingly more relevant as long as increasing numbers of diverse students are recruited. We will now present our ideas about cultural differences in learning beliefs – systems of values and routines regarding knowledge-acquisition processes – and how they should be approached. One of the illustrations of learning beliefs held in different cultures is the *Mind* and *Virtue* orientations.

Culturally-based learning beliefs & their challenges for the classroom

Contemporary assumptions about core and culturally specific aspects of learning are based in part on philosophical traditions that vary across cultures. In order to understand learning beliefs and their role in the classroom environment, the philosophical and cultural context must be incorporated into the discussion. This is especially important for the creation of democratic practice within the classroom since the different cultural preferences for learning have different values concerning participation, discussions and voicing of disagreements.

In the Western world, the legacy of Socrates and his method of dialogue based on the premise that is always valid to question established knowledge, continues to dominate beliefs about learning. Based on the logical generation of arguments and counterarguments concerning any given position (Peng & Nisbett, 1999), students in Western classrooms learn behaviours associated with this Socratic and highly cognitive approach to learning. The focus is on the task with a combination of dialogue and discourse as the venue for task oriented learning. This approach has been referred to as ‘Mind’ orientation because of the strong focus on cognitive processes. In the East-Asian region, the system of behavioural principles associated with maintaining harmonious social relationships, which is reflected in the lasting legacy of the teachings of Confucius, has resulted in a belief that learning is an effortful process that is highly related to the moral and social improvement of the person (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). The process is more hierarchical and personal developmental oriented, and for this reason more influenced by social processes and less of the task oriented arguments as we see in the Western oriented *Mind* learning culture. Li (2003) labelled this cultural learning belief a *Virtue* orientation.

The mind and virtue orientations towards learning differ from each other regarding what is thought of as the purpose of learning (e.g. what people think the goal of learning is), the processes that are applied, the personal regard one has for learning (e.g. why learning is important), the affect associated with it (e.g. whether one experiences joy or dread from learning), and how it is socially perceived (e.g. the perception of successful learners vs. unsuccessful ones and perceptions of teachers). For example, previous research at the international Jacobs University Bremen in Germany has revealed that faculty members from Western cultural backgrounds prefer Socratic communication styles in the classroom, whereas students from non-Western cultural backgrounds are not always well aware of this preference (Kühnen et al., 2009). The active participation, in the form of critical thinking and formulating one’s own ideas about the course content, that faculty values and expects of students, can be thus misunder-

stood by students with Asian and Latin American backgrounds as being impolite and disruptive to the learning process.

Since these findings suggest that there is a greater discrepancy between the perceptions of an ideal learning behaviour between the faculty and the non-Western students, than between the faculty and the Western students (Kühnen, et al., 2012), it is our hypothesis that faculty sets the standards and norms for teaching and learning within their classrooms. If not addressed adequately, this is likely to result in a more successful academic performance of the Western students compared to the international students, solely due to a match in learning beliefs. In support of this risk, Kühnen and colleagues (2012) found that students' GPA at Jacobs University was correlated with the ease with which one engages in the Socratic / Mind-oriented communication styles, as valued by faculty. This cultural difference can undermine non-Western students' capacity for academic performance. Furthermore, an extra challenge for the Asian students generally is their higher respect for authority, implying that subjugating behaviour is more likely in situations where western oriented classroom culture dominates without compensatory measures that assure more even distribution of involvement. In line with previous research, we may assume that the responses from Chinese students will be formed by the attitudes that may be perceived as less actively participating in classroom discussions due to a stronger Virtue-orientation. In this orientation, which emphasizes that learning is not merely a process of cognitive development but one of moral development of the learner as well, students are more likely to be motivated to show respect for pre-existing knowledge and their teachers. Silent contemplation and a thorough understanding of the text before starting to ask questions are important learning behaviours. Additionally, students are to dedicate themselves to the learning process diligently. Empirical evidence was found for the persistence of a preference for these learning behaviours by Van Egmond (2011). In this cross-cultural analysis, Chinese students were for example found to be more likely to first check the reading when having a question regarding the course content, before turning to the teacher than German students were (van Egmond et al., 2011). Also, Chinese students indicated that they

perceived such behaviour as preferable, over the more direct and critical Mind-oriented learning behaviours. Since Chinese students hold different beliefs concerning the ideal learning processes, leading to less active interaction in the Western classroom environment, this may put them at a disadvantage resulting in inequality in interaction and lower participation. From the political-theory point of view, the non-involvement should be met by initiatives that focus on how to engage and involve the oppressed (Bourdieu, 1998). From the communicative perspective, Habermas describes an ideal situation where people feel free to voice own ideas and perspectives without being repressed by other's authority (Nørager, 1989). Here, it may not be the authority per se, but the Western ideals of a classroom culture that create a hidden curriculum in terms of expectations regarding behaviour.

Since the content of these conceptions and beliefs about learning fundamentally differs depending on which cultural tradition one has been exposed to, the existence of different orientations within a learning setting may cause conflict, misunderstanding and inequality. However, as we see in the international management area, if we can compensate in processes for lack of natural tendency to voice ideas, express disagreements and oppose to culturally established assumptions, we might facilitate a more even contribution in the learning process in the classroom. In a business context, lack of involvement where people present their unique ideas is a situation of lost opportunities for utilizing diversity (Lane et al, 2004), and this notion also applies to educational settings. Ideas from international management that can be applied in the classroom are for example: Give those who are more restrained better time to prepare, let them start the discussion and set premises, make sure that each person gets a certain time in a predictable way; and other related suggestions. In our view, the classroom setting, due to its nature, should have an even higher ambition to achieve awareness, promote open discussions and collective reflections about learning, as well as develop a safe practice among students. If students in multicultural, educational settings master these processes it will contribute to making diversity a success-factor also outside the educational settings, in the

globalized world, both in the political as well as business contexts. Now, we will present the training concept of the Diversity Icebreaker in order to show how this concept can be used in classrooms to address the challenges described above.

The Diversity Icebreaker

The Diversity Icebreaker (DI) is a training and development concept, based on a psychological questionnaire and typically used in team building, project work and innovation seminars, cross-cultural trainings, diversity management, communication and conflict management trainings, kick-offs, as well as self-understanding and leadership development. The aim of it is to make people aware of the diversity in preferences for communication and problem solving when working together (Ekelund, 2008). The DI questionnaire has 42 items with a semi-ipsative response scale, measuring individual preferences for communication, interaction and problem solving and providing results on three categories labelled Red, Blue and Green. Validation studies have been conducted relating the concepts such as personality, emotional intelligence, cultural values, team performance (Ekelund & Langvik, 2008), cognitive styles (Pluta & Ekelund, 2012) and learning styles (Ekelund, Rossi, & van Egmond, 2010). The DI questionnaire is used in a 1-2 hour workshop format that consists of five subsequent stages:

1. Filling in the questionnaire to obtain individual results on Red, Blue and Green.
2. Group work in mono-coloured groups on two tasks:
 - “What are the good qualities of your own colour in interaction with others?”
 - “What are the qualities of the two other colour groups in interactions with others?”

3. Sharing the work results between the groups (attention is given to the processes of social construction taking place while the meaning of Red, Blue and Green is being negotiated).
4. Collective reflection on the workshop process and sharing of lessons learned.
5. Planning implications and practice for the future.

The “trilemma” structure of Red, Blue and Green in DI combined with the seminar makes this concept different from similar psychological tools. First of all, the three categories emerged from focus groups of ordinary people who were asked to group various persuasive behaviours used in communication – they are not a result of factor analysis performed on a number of personality or value items in a questionnaire (Ekelund, 1997). Second, the categories are socially constructed in a bottom-up local process using items in the questionnaire as a stimulus for discussion. This makes easier for participants to create a shared understanding of the categories without an outside expertise reference, and in such a way create a local classroom culture where language is anchored in their own behavioural practice.

We have suggested earlier that the categories of Red, Blue and Green, which meaning is being defined during the DI workshop, can be used as part of the creation process of a shared “team mental model” – a cognitive diversity model that can serve as a common platform for students’ learning processes. The above-mentioned cultural differences in learning styles (Mind-orientation in the western and Virtue-orientation in the eastern societies) can create a challenge for interactions as well as undermine the potential for learning and innovation. The categories of Red, Blue and Green have a development history relevant for learning and addressing cultural differences. We believe that students from different cultures could build their own Third culture as a classroom culture.

At the time when the DI questionnaire and the training of communication were developed in 1995 Gardner's ideas on the 7 intelligences were highly influential (Ekelund, 1997). His ideas focused on different ways of learning and training in order to acquire knowledge and competence. This tradition has not been continued in research or in practice and this article is the first one that revisits these aspects of learning processes. In spite of this influence, the use of DI with the issue of learning styles has not been explored further. The working documents from the development of the DI questionnaire (i.e. statements created by and assigned to the three categories by focus groups (Ekelund, 1997) suggest that Red, Blue and Green can at least partially reflect different learning styles. For example, Red is more oriented towards discussions, role play, emotions, relevance and context; while Blue favours numbers, lists, analysis, sensing, sequential, deductions and concrete matters; and Green prefers concepts, mind maps, intuition, reflections, perspectives and abstract ideas.

After conducting a DI workshop during the European Conference on Educational Research in Helsinki, Finland (Ekelund, Rossi, & van Egmond, 2010), we asked participants to suggest teaching and learning activities that could be related to Red, Blue or Green learning preferences. Below are examples of the ideas each of the mono-colour groups created for their own colour preference (next page):

Table 1*Suggested teaching and learning processes*

Blue	Red	Green
Analysis of literary texts	Encourage students	Simulation games
Simulations around real issues/problems	Peer feedback in activities	Improvising a presentation on different subjects, for example: music, language learning, etc.
Data analysis around global issues	Forum theatre to engage with topic	Try to see things through a different lens/from a different perspective
Learning an instrument	Interactive presentations	Mind-maps and concept maps
Science investigation	Student-led discussions in small groups	Big picture thinking: summaries, visioning exercises
Design a solution (technical device) to a problem	Collaborative problem solving	Self-reflection
Listen to a well-structured lecture	Peer interviews	Drawing Sensory exploration
Study tables with data or graphs and formulate conclusions		Brainstorming Discussion Collaborative research
Summarize text		Reflective groups Philosophical dialogue Work towards a personal goal

Additionally, an on-going research in Norway and Israel aims to investigate the relationship of Red, Blue and Green to learning and cognitive styles, as a part of an external validation process of the questionnaire (Ekelund, 2012). Preliminary results suggest that Green is closely related to connective and holistic thinking styles, whereas Blue is related to sequential and analytical thinking. The Red category's relation to either of the styles has yet to be determined (Ekelund & Pluta, 2012).

Based on the aforementioned arguments, we assert that Red, Blue and Green can be looked at as a model relevant for illustrating different learning styles. In addition, a study by Ekelund, Shneor and Gehrke (2008) showed small cultural differences between the preferred levels of Red, Blue and Green and we have reasons to believe that the trilemma structure is replicable across cultures, even though examples have been given where content of the categories has slightly varied. DI has been used in many different student settings like Singapore (Romani, 2013) and Bangladesh (Orgeret, 2012). Examples that have led to publications include a study program in Norway that used it annually as a process to establish shared language for project work and learning (Lieblein, 2009). Since 2006, it has been used in Switzerland in an executive management education program for multicultural student groups (Lane, Maznevski, Dietz, & DiStefano, 2009). The DI has also been applied in training programs for mentoring women in order to enhance self- and interaction understanding (Poulsen, 2012). In Italy, the tool was used as part of first week introduction among the new students as a part of self-other learning processes (Ekelund, Shneor & Gehrke, 2008).

Additionally, the Diversity Icebreaker has been used in relation to the development of democratic approaches in cross-cultural management training among employees (different ethnic groups in Bosnia together with representatives from European countries) in OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) in the department for democracy. It has also been applied to achieve a systematic change in a communicative culture in a political organization. There, the idea was to create a culture among young members in which diverse perspectives

would be acknowledged and combined with a positive integration of all these perspectives (Sivertsen, Esnault & Ekelund, 2004). At the moment, an ongoing research project examines the use of the concept in the Middle East to see if it can improve conflict resolution processes. However, this has been done without directly addressing the concept of democracy as such.

Therefore we believe that the Diversity Icebreaker can be used as an illustration of different learning beliefs, pertinent to the Mind-Virtue dimension, which can be shared and understood across different cultures present in the classroom. Red, Blue and Green can thus provide the students with an important element of cross-cultural competence (Maznevski & DiStefano, 2000) and integrate them (Matoba, 2011). In the following section, we discuss which components of the DI processes are directly relevant for promoting democratic practice in culturally diverse educational settings. The components of the DI seminar that we find most relevant for this purpose are: Acknowledgement of minorities and minority's perspectives, Egalitarian and Balanced power distribution, and Empowerment and Deliberation.

The Diversity Icebreaker's relevance for democratic practice

The approach of political democracy includes the perspective that the majority decides. In the DI seminar, one of the central learning points is that we are all different and have different perspectives, but in order to do work best together, we should integrate and be respectful towards all the available perspectives (Ekelund & Langvik, 2008). Being seen and acknowledged by 'the other' from a positive perspective is an important expectation. It also promotes the individual willingness to voice one's perspective and contribute one's unique competence to the group (Ekelund & Rydningen, 2008). Participants develop a shared model of an ideal interaction during the seminar which creates an expectancy that proposed ideas will be well received by others (Ekelund, 2013). The identification of positive qualities and competences, which a person brings to the joint work process, is in line with

perspectives in positive psychology and competence utilisation (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). From a social-philosophical perspective, Honneth stressed the need and the right of each person to be acknowledged on the basis of his or her unique qualities relevant for productive work (1995). The acknowledgement of each other's positive contribution and the positive emotional climate seem to make it easier to share personal perspectives and experiences, both within and outside of educational contexts.

It is recognized that people are attracted to those who are similar to themselves (Heider, 1958). In the Diversity Icebreaker model we create the same kind of attraction despite the fact that the seminar highlights differences between Red, Blue and Green. In our view, respect for interdependency and complementarity is a similarity that participants share and which is available on a higher order, but which draws people together regardless (Matoba, 2011). In one way, participants differentiate themselves in colours, but in another: they integrate with each other at a higher-level – in the model of complementarity represented by Red, Blue and Green. It is a process that unifies and diversifies at the same time (Matoba, 2011). Thus, the shared value of respect for emphasized diversity is the component that creates attraction and thus a sense of a shared community within a specific environment. The same concept can be applied within the confines of the classroom space, thus allowing for the development of a shared culture that may lead to increased rapport and trust among participants and thus more engagement and active learning.

One way that this is achieved in DI seminars is through the equal amount of time and attention spent on each colour, and the balanced, positive self-understanding taking place in each of the groups. The Red, Blue and Green categories are conceptually defined partially by the questionnaire's items as well as by the participants themselves during the seminar. Thus, people with different colour preferences can more easily realize that it is crucial to depend on each other to best solve issues. There are no power differences embedded in the DI model of Red, Blue and Green. Additionally, in order to underline this egalitarian perspective, we seek to create even-numbered groups in order to emphasize

the balance between the Red, Blue and Green groups. This also prevents any colour group from forming a 'majority' alone. The egalitarian model promotes more open communication, leading to better understanding of each other, as well as of relevant tasks and challenges. The egalitarian model bears an implicit understanding that the rules cannot be changed by the people of one colour alone but only in a dialog that shows respect for different perspectives. It creates a trust in processes that are fair and involve the participants. The egalitarian character also seems to make it easier to reciprocally give each other feedback, both negative and positive, which is important for learning and development. The egalitarian balance is a practice that contrasts a classroom culture where one and only one learning belief dominates. It gives an opportunity to explore differences in a balanced way and create a meta-learning about learning differences as well as better ideas for working together in student groups. The Diversity Icebreaker has been found to create empowerment and deliberation of groups in relation to real and symbolic power (Ekelund & Langvik, 2006; Ekelund, Iversen & Davcheva, 2008). Furthermore, articles by Kristin Orgeret (2012) – presenting experiences from multicultural student groups in Bangladesh – and Birgit Urstad (2012), point at issues of power and change as essential components of the Diversity Icebreaker process. Romani (2013) gave some recommendations on teaching based upon more multicultural student groups in Singapore with this perspective. The three main ideas conveyed in these works can be summarized as follows:

First, there is the empowerment component: the DI seminar creates positivity and engagement, which makes people willing to be part of a dialogue/trialogue and work together across the different colour groups. The shared, positive egalitarian experience might be used as a comparative platform to reflect upon other contexts, where unbalanced power is either salient or implicit in the interaction, e.g. in case of formal roles, organizational and cultural values, expert perspectives, personal authority, informal leaders and ruling metaphors, basic assumptions – and even the dominant learning beliefs early visible in the cross-cultural classroom environment. For example, questions for reflection could

include: “Out of these different power systems: what are the legitimate processes today?”, “What are the not legitimate processes?” and “What is functioning well – and what is not?”

The second component is one of deliberation: the introduction of Red, Blue and Green categories presents an alternative framework, which creates powerful metaphors that may regulate interaction and language use. The use of the colours to describe the categories represents a new perspective, an attractive alternative to established power structures. In DI, we install a culture of communication, where no one is more powerful than another. This creates a positive expectation for those who were uncomfortable with or suppressed by the status quo.

The third component is a combination of empowerment and deliberative eye-opening. This component surfaces when participants collectively realize that they created the meaning for the three categories themselves. It means that the categories that they may use in the future do not have to be the ones that they knew. This component represents the symbolic power that is engrained in language, which both Bourdieu and Foucault have described as contemporary power systems (Nørager; 1989, Bourdieu, 1998)

As aforementioned, establishing a common ground, or shared mental models, has been the central premise for the management of multicultural teams in organizational settings. We suggest that in a multicultural educational setting this can be achieved with the Diversity Icebreaker because of the varied components and the need for active participation in the process of embodying the colour categories with meaning, when a shared understanding develops that overcomes the many differences within the classroom, allowing for the benefits of diversity to shine through. As stated above, there is a clear connection between the tool and the development of democratic practice, which makes the concept even more relevant for educational settings. A positive integrating practice of egalitarian and empowering character has been identified above. We have also found that different learning and teaching practices reflect the Red, Blue or Green preferences.

The question of how the cultural orientations of Mind and Virtue relate to the concepts of Red, Blue and Green however remains unanswered. Do the Mind and Virtue orientation overlap with Red, Blue and Green? Empirical data that has been collected so far is inconclusive. Significant correlations were found for students from Poland (N=72) and Russia (N=112), between Mind orientation and a preference for not only Green, but Red and Blue as well. Virtue orientation yielded significant correlations with Green only among the Polish students and with Blue among the Russian students. These findings are however in contrast with a sample of Chinese students (N=66), where none of the DI colours correlated significantly with either Mind- or Virtue-orientation.

Data so far point to a lack of consistency between the models, which implies that exploration of these cultural learning beliefs should be conducted at both local and individual levels in educational settings. In line with our experience with the Diversity Icebreaker, we suggest that this process and model is used to establish a team mental model while building a third culture, which represents the forming of a unique classroom culture by the students in each class. These qualities can then be used to explore the culturally based ideas regarding learning, including both the theory of Mind and Virtue orientation as well as other cultural theories.

The ideas of diversified learning and teaching practices that have been presented in this article can be seen as a repertoire of practices that is relevant for participants regardless of their cultural background. Exploring different practices of learning, be it for oneself or in preparation of working with others, will develop one's flexibility and creativity in working across contexts. Moreover, it will enhance democracy practices in a broader political context.

Summary and conclusion

The Diversity Icebreaker has been used in multicultural contexts, both in business and education. In the latter, we suggest that the creation of Red, Blue and Green leads to a common ground, shared mental models of diversity, and can be used as an introduction to cultural specific differences in education, e.g. cultural learning beliefs.

We explored whether the ideas of Mind and Virtue orientation can be combined with the categories of the Diversity Icebreaker in the classroom environment to provide detailed information and a thorough understanding of cultural and individual based learning beliefs. We state that the concepts of Red, Blue and Green can be linked to the thinking and learning styles (Ekelund, Langvik and Nordgård, 2007; Zhang, 2008) and that the awareness of the diversity in these styles can be used to promote better interaction and collective learning among students across cultures (Ekelund, Shneor and Gehrke, 2008).

Since the DI seminars acknowledge individual and group characteristics across and within cultures, using it as a pedagogical tool will help to establish a common language that goes beyond rigid stereotypes, acknowledges the importance of how groups see themselves and how they think that others see them, recognizes the positive and negative characteristics of each group (Ekelund, Davcheva & Iversen, 2009), and provides dedicated time for self-reflection. This solid foundation can also be used in order to explore important democratic practices, which go beyond institutional structures. Democracy is also a question of involvement and voice, fairness and transparent use of power. We have suggested that some components of the Diversity Icebreaker seminar can be explicitly used in awareness training and competence development as related to these democratic concepts. In conclusion, we claim that the DI session creates a situation where people feel safe to voice their unique ideas, values and competences through a shared, common language because they expect to be treated in an egalitarian way with a positive interpersonal

attitude and without the need to be afraid of being excluded from the group at large.

We suggest that an understanding of diversity both on the cultural Mind–Virtue differences level and at local classroom culture level with Red, Blue and Green, will allow for creation of a common culture that is more inclusive and understanding of differences as well as how they manifest in behaviours, expectations and perceptions within the classroom based learning environment. By applying the Diversity Icebreaker, we believe the teachers will be able to more effectively create a solid foundation built on understanding and communication that will help successfully manage diversity as well as promote learning and cross-cultural competence in the classroom. For example, teachers can use the Red, Blue and Green concepts, as well as their understanding of Mind and Virtue orientations, to devise lesson plans and pedagogical exercises that incorporate elements and activities relevant for each of the colours and orientations (Ekelund, Rossi, & Van Egmond, 2010). Furthermore, teachers and students alike can use the knowledge gained in the DI seminar in multiple ways long after the seminar is completed. In this manner, they not only respond to and recognize different learning values, thinking styles and behaviours within the classroom, but also provide opportunities for students to expand their skill set in becoming more competent in areas beyond their comfort zone. Additionally, students assigned to groups can use the shared language and knowledge developed in the DI seminar to assign tasks and learn how to work more efficient as a diversified team.

Successful diversity management philosophy and practice is not only based on the recognition and celebration of the uniqueness of individuals and the characteristics of cultural groups, but also on the integration and utilization of these factors to benefit the organization or group. This philosophy is also true within the classroom environment. Although restricted by external pressures, such as standardized exams, which promote and demand particular learning styles and related behaviours, the classroom environment can and should be inclusive for diversity. Knowledge and understanding of cultural and individual learning beliefs

and styles, as well as concrete information on the application of such knowledge through the use of pedagogical tools, can help teachers create a common classroom culture for the benefit of all.

We have stated that the interaction and learning processes in multicultural student groups can be a challenge both for the interacting students as well as for students that immigrate into educational systems not in line with their own cultural background. We have also illustrated how Chinese students in the Western educational systems might be marginalized due to certain cultural preferences for interaction in relation to authority, as well as due to different learning beliefs systems. Our findings suggest that it is not only the students for whom intercultural trainings could be beneficial. Faculty members also need to be prepared to deal with the cultural diversity in expectations and behavioural tendencies that will manifest themselves in the intercultural classroom environment. One of the remaining tasks for the future is to design and apply interventions for faculty that would help them to practically deal with teaching in multicultural classroom environment. This includes issues related to communication, language, feedback, teaching methods and culturally-fair evaluation, as well as breaking of the stereotypes regarding expectations based on student's cultural background. The use of the Diversity Icebreaker as a tool to help groups better understand differences and similarities in learning helps to create a sense of a shared, third culture in a manner that overcomes some of the traditional barriers of managing diversity in the classroom. By creating a safe space where all members, both teachers and students, regardless of cultural differences, are actively engaged in the creation of the shared culture, democratic principles and processes can be achieved within the diverse classroom, to the benefit of all.

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