TEACHING THE CONCEPTS OF CULTURE SHOCK AND CULTURAL HETEROGENEITY IN ONLINE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COURSES

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Abstract: *The use of engaging digital activities has risen in importance given the current context in higher education where most universities have moved their teaching activities online in order to protect the health of students and staff. The situation where online university classes are disturbingly quiet has made headlines from one side of the Atlantic to the other (*Boston Globe*,* The Guardian*). Educators worldwide have decried the situation where although their students are well versed in using digital technology, their performance does not seem to measure up to their instructors' expectations when it came to digital learning. Some have pointed out that this might be a cultural issue, as the students' digital skills are not oriented towards the function of learning, while others have drawn attention to socio-economic issues such as good quality internet access or the availability of a quiet learning space at home. In this article interactive learning activities are described which have been used in teaching Intercultural communication to postgraduate students at "Ovidius" University of Constanta's Faculty of Letters. The research approach draws on the critical incidents and critical conversation practice, where (online) classroom interaction scenarios are described, observed, and analyzed in order to provide viable conclusions and good practice examples for developing depth of understanding of particular phenomena and key concepts in Intercultural communication.*

Keywords: *intercultural communication; digital activities; interculturalism; didactics; cultural shock*

Introduction

Intercultural communication is a relatively new discipline of study in the academia. It is mostly taught to students in various fields of the humanities and social sciences, and in business schools. American scholars such as Ruth Benedict, Clyde Kluckhohn, Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, and Edward T. Hall are widely recognized as the founders of Intercultural communication as an academic discipline. Most of them were employed by the American Foreign Service Institute where they helped to train U.S. diplomats and supported the U.S. foreign policy in its efforts towards building an international community after the Second World War.

Being related to cultural anthropology as well as cross-cultural psychology, the field of Intercultural communication relies on the relativist paradigm and on the systems theory (Bennett). It sees language use, nonverbal

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behavior, cognitive style, communication style, and cultural values as "cultural elements," i.e. forms of meaning within the greater system of culture, and it studies and describes how subjects who use a certain set of elements interact with individuals who guide their existence after different or not so different cultural elements.

The importance of intercultural communication has grown, given the fact that we live in a "global village" (McLuhan) where it is becoming more and more important to be able to deal with problems such as cultural shock, discrimination, and fear of differences (Coroban). When adequately assumed and practiced with rationality and creativity, intercultural communicative competences allow groups that come from wholly different cultural backgrounds and social realities to work together efficiently (Pearce). The media could have an important, active role in the dissemination of intercultural values, thus helping to limit discriminatory attitudes in countries with emerging economies such as Romania, where the media does not generally provide in-depth and contextualized coverage of external news (Petre 67-68). Intercultural competences are found among the recommendations of UNESCO for the formation of a complete "global citizen" and are also supported by the European Commission (2018) guidelines for lifelong learning, which mention the importance of intercultural skills among key learning areas such as Communication competences, Cultural awareness and expression, and Social and Civic Competence. As such, the European Commission's proposals recognize "the need to include modern (including digital) forms of cultural expression, inter-cultural awareness and the global perspective" (35) into the education and formation of the European citizen, who thus would become better-informed, more capable of making political decisions on his/her own, with an improved critical thinking capability and generally more capable of democratic participation.

In Romania, the study of Intercultural Communication is an important part of curricula across many fields and in many higher education institutions. At "Ovidius" University of Constanta, in south-eastern Romania (in Dobrogea), it is taught to undergraduate and postgraduate students at the Faculty of Letters, the Faculty of History and Political Science, the Faculty of Theology and the Faculty of Psychology. Generally, the region of Dobrogea is considered an "ethnic mosaic," a unique example of functioning multiculturalism among the historical regions of Romania. Nevertheless, extensive empirical comparative studies of intercultural competence that would bear witness to this often repeated fact have yet to be carried out, to the best of my knowledge.

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Critical Incidents. Methodology

Critical incidents usually consist in short narratives or descriptions of situations where misinterpretations or conflict ensues due to cultural differences between the subjects in question. As part of the exploratory process, students are asked to provide feedback after the activity (an action/reflection cycle).

As examples of reflective practice for higher education instructors teaching Intercultural communication, this article analyzes the use of critical didactic incidents in Intercultural communication courses attended by postgraduate students in Public Relations and Intercultural Development, a professional Masters' degree offered by Ovidius University of Constanta's Faculty of Letters. Not only do such activities provide useful examples for educators but they also benefit the learners through experiential learning. Students benefit from the discussion and interpretation of empirical data in the lecture room as it helps them pursue meaning and this ensures an in-depth understanding of the theoretical concepts (Chambers et al. 104).

In education sciences, the critical incidents technique has first been described by Flanagan in 1954 as a set of practices for making observations of human behavior to contribute to teaching others how to solve problems:

> A critical incident is a set of activities, extracted from the day to day work of experienced or expert individuals and which deals with the act of completing tasks. […] critical incidents could have successful or unsuccessful outcomes. The key element of the method is in gathering important facts concerning human activities in defined situations… (Amade-Escot 3)

Studying critical incidents is an important part of training as a teacher or of preparing students for employment as it can offer learners firsthand experience in professional practice (Amade-Escot 4). Perhaps the technique is favored in Intercultural communication activity workbooks and teacher's books because it emphasizes practicality and offers a learning experience that is as close as possible to a real intercultural encounter.

Critical didactic incidents or significant learning incidents have been first used in the United States in teaching various professionals in the 1950s and in multicultural comparisons in the 1960s. In Europe they have been used since the 1990s for cross-cultural comparisons. According to Apedaile and Schill,

> Critical incidents in intercultural communication training are brief descriptions of situations in which a misunderstanding, problem, or conflict arises as a result of the cultural differences of the interacting

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> parties, or a problem of cross-cultural adaptation and communication. Each incident gives only enough information to set the stage and then describes what happened and possibly manifests the feelings and reactions of the people involved. It does not explain the cultural differences that people bring to the situation; these are meant to be discovered or revealed as part of the different activities… (7)

Critical incidents usually incorporate these components:

- a description of the situation (which includes the main cultural differences as well as details as to "who?" was involved, "where?" it happened, "when?" it occurred, "what?" transpired, and "how?" the incident took place);
- a few questions regarding the behavior, feelings and/or thoughts of the subjects as well as prompts regarding what the learners would consider "appropriate" behavior in the given situation;
- the learners are usually offered alternative explanations and, following in-class debate and discussion, a "preferred" explanation is found which should help the students in understanding the taught concept;
- finally, reasons are elicited from the audience as to why the "preferred" explanation is best in that case in the target culture (isomorphic attributions) (Korhonen 295-296).

The use of critical incidents helps to provide a deeper understanding of cultural differences, it clarifies culturally determined interpretations and even promotes appropriate behavior in intercultural encounters, as well as making the learners more motivated to attend Intercultural communication activities (Wight 128-129, qtd. in Korhonen 296).

To offer an example, an explanation which is shared by many scholars of intercultural communication to explain the multiple perspectives through which humans filter their cultural encounters is that people tend to perceive what surrounds them through the "colored glasses" of their own culture (Bennett 7). In this respect, instructors often use Description, Interpretation and Evaluation (DIE) exercise to allow students to become aware of how easily value judgements can influence cross-cultural interaction. For example, learners are shown images from other cultures than their own, of ambiguous cultural scenes of object, with no headings or captions, and are asked to say something about what they see. First, the instructor draws three columns on the whiteboard with the headings "Description," "Interpretation," and "Evaluation," and writes the students' answers in the corresponding column. Second, after the instructor explains the differences between the three

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categories of statements and how he/she divided the learners' answers in the three categories, they are shown a different image or object and are asked to first describe it. Listening to the students' answers, the instructor corrects them if they make any evaluations or interpretations. Afterwards, the teacher requests evaluations, as well as one positive and one negative interpretation for each evaluation. For instance, an image of a woman from an indigenous Andean population touching her forehead is presented (the example here is fictional), which a student could interpret as a gesture of respect. A possible positive evaluation could be that the woman is trying to be polite and, conversely, a negative evaluation would be that she is trying to obtain somebody's favor by unnecessarily making this gesture. Third, the students are divided into groups of four and are each given an image and asked to fill in a DIE form. After each group has finished the exercise, the instructor can reveal the real significance of each picture and the source. Finally, the whole class is asked for feedback regarding what they considered to be the most difficult part of the activity. Then, the instructor emphasizes how being able to describe something that is culturally different before interpreting and evaluating it is an important skill in intercultural communication, and how DIE activities largely depend on the observer's cultural background (Bennett, Bennett).

"Culture shock and Cultural heterogeneity" Activity

The incident that we propose touches on the concept of culture shock and how witnessing the feelings elicited in the subject can lead to understanding the cultural heterogeneity of national cultures if the cultural encounter that resulted in shock took place within the subject's own culture. The concept of culture shock was coined in 1954 by the Canadian anthropologist Kalervo Oberg in a talk he gave to the Women's Club of Rio de Janeiro. It appeared in print when his talk was published in the journal *Practical Anthropology* in 1960. Oberg famously explained the concept by studying Christian missionaries' reaction to their frequent cultural "transplantation", which was common in their activity, and used the phrase "occupational disease" to refer to it. According to the Canadian scholar, the four phases of culture shock include: the honeymoon phase (when cultural differences are seen in a romantic way), the negotiation phase (when differences lead to anxiety), the adjustment phase (when some positive attitudes are formed towards the host culture), and the adaptation phase (or bicultural phase, when subjects begin to feel at home in the host culture).

Culture shock is an emotional and psychological experience involving discomfort and existential stress which are triggered following a change of the subject's sociocultural environment. The experience of adaptation to a new culture can result in feelings of frustration or rejection, of loss of identity, and

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even outrage, anger, generalized fear, surprise or fascination towards the new cultural context (Gavreliuc 58).

One way of making students aware of the intercultural tenet of abandoning ethnocentrism is by demonstrating how national cultures are not actually homogenous systems. National cultures are diverse structures which include multiple social identities such as social classes, income groups, urban and rural identities, gender identities, etc. For example, an inhabitant of Bucharest from a high-income group may feel less cultural distance when meeting an inhabitant of Lyon from a high-income group than when encountering an inhabitant of rural Romania from a low-income group. After all, ethnicity is considered a social construct rather than a "biological" reality that could represent a criterion for classifying cultures (Gavreliuc 42-43).

The description of the proposed online activity is given below:

Prerequisites

1. Make sure that the learners have been introduced to the concepts of culture shock and ethnocentrism in previous lectures or seminars. Greater depth of understanding could be achieved if concepts such as stereotype and cultural heterogeneity (internal variation within a culture) have also been mentioned and explained. Also, this activity is designed to take place online on a live video streaming platform which should allow the presenter to share audio/video materials. If the app does not allow this then links to the video materials could be sent to the students instead. The platform should also include a chat room where the instructor can paste web links.

Preparation

2. The instructor lets the students know that a critical incident will follow by telling them that next there will be a practical activity which will involve an assessment of their reaction after watching two videos depicting two manifestations of a cultural aspect among different sub-cultures within their own "national culture."
3. The instructor previously selects a cultural or social phenomenon that is bound to elicit an emotional response from the audience, and which may be encountered among differing societal groups within the learners' own culture. For instance, consider the use of "recreational" substances. Witnessing this negative habit among adolescents would rarely cause surprise or shock as it is the subject of many social campaigns aimed at limiting its tragic outcomes for teenagers, and the society is somewhat used to hearing about it (the mere exposure effect), whereas hearing about the use of narcotic substances among social groups which are generally perceived as "respectable" could cause some reaction of surprise or astonishment. For this purpose, we have

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selected two interviews which are freely available on the internet. The first one was carried out by Vice Romania and the subjects are adolescents who are asked by the interviewers why hallucinogenic or psychoactive plants (a phenomenon known as "etnobotanice" in Romania) are legal while marijuana is not. The length of the interview is three minutes. The second one is a longer duration video documentary consisting in oral history interviews taken in Volovăț, a commune in the Suceava county in northeastern Romania, a region which is usually associated with wonderfully painted medieval monasteries and the idyllic and bucolic countryside where locals lead a traditional way of life. The students are shown the first 12 minutes of the oral history interviews where members of the community testified to the decade-old local "tradition" of drinking ether by itself or mixed with locally produced or store-bought brandy in order to intoxicate themselves on social occasions such as Sunday gatherings, round dances, weddings, and even religious celebrations.

Application

4. Have the learners watch the first video but do not ask for reactions or interpretations yet.
5. Show the second video, this time asking the participants to write down any feelings they get while watching the documentary. This will help them offer feedback later.
6. At the end of the second presentation ask the learners to fill in a questionnaire using an online application like Google Forms or Microsoft Forms. It is important to use an online service especially in cases where the number of participants is large because it instantly generates the survey results, which allows on-the-spot analysis and discussion. Make sure to ask for the participants' consent if you plan to use the results of the form in your research. The survey should include closed questions such as five-level Likert items (possible answers: "Totally"; "To a greater extent"; "Moderately"; "To a lesser extent"; "Not at all") as well as a few open questions where short answers are required:

Question 1. To what extent were you surprised by the interview discussing psychoactive plants?
Question 2. To what extent were you surprised by the interview discussing the drinking of ether as a psychoactive substance?
Question 3. What surprised you the most about the second video?
Question 4. To what extent the second video made you experience rejection?
Question 5. To what extent the first video made you experience rejection?

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Question 6. To what extent watching the second video has changed your perception of the idyllic Rădăuţi-Volovăţ area?
Question 7. Do you consider the two series of interviews to be similar?
Question 8. Do you agree to the statement: "Fundamentally, there is no difference between the habit of consuming psychoactive plants and the habit of consuming ether"?

Reflection and interpretation

7. After filling in the questionnaire the instructor can share the results with the participants and discuss each question in turn. The teacher should avoid straightforward answers and instead focus on suggesting and guiding the learners towards "preferred" answers and then discussing why those answers were selected. Ultimately, the concept of cultural heterogeneity should be brought into discussion and the learners should think of various ways in which "national cultures" could contain different cultural identities such as ethnicity, class, traditions, language, sense of space, urban/rural identity and so on. Then, the students should be asked to provide examples from their own experience when they felt estranged in their own country or when they felt at home while visiting foreign countries. Learners should be given the opportunity to explore subjects such as corruption, poverty, women's rights (for this issue in the Romanian context see the discussions in Tocia 2018 and in Oancea 2012), LGBTQ discrimination (see Codău 2017), minority rights, etc. Events that have changed the way cultures perceive their own heterogeneity, like the 9/11 attacks, could also be mentioned (see Gălbează 2013). If more students bring up ethnic identity differences within the same country they should be reminded that sometimes regional identity could be stronger than the ethnic one and that, for example, in the case of Romania, there could be more cultural distance between an inhabitant of Oltenia and an inhabitant of Maramureş than between an ethnic Romanian and an ethnic Hungarian living in the same Transylvanian village (Gavreliuc 52-53).

Discussion

The above activity has been used in teaching Intercultural communication to postgraduate students of Ovidius University of Constanta's Faculty of Letters. A total of ten Masters students participated in the activity and four of them had studied Intercultural communication during their undergraduate studies in Journalism at the same institution.

The role of the first question was to attempt to measure to what extent the learners were used to hearing about the phenomenon of psychoactive plants use among Romanian youth. The expectation was that, overall, the students

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would not declare themselves surprised due to the mere exposure effect. This principle states that repeated exposure to a somewhat negative, neutral or positive stimulus leads to a more and more positive appreciation of the same stimulus in time and is based on the 1968 research of the American psychologist Robert Zajonc (Gavreliuc 73-75).

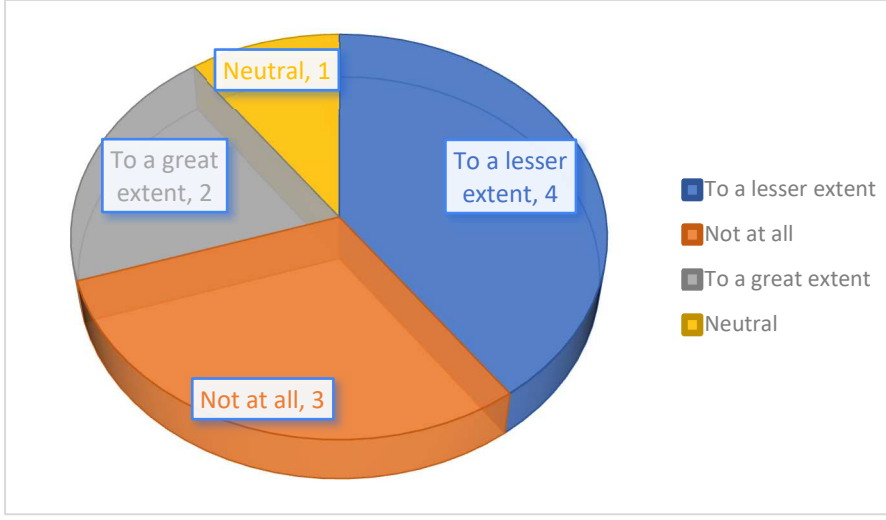


Figure 1. Question 1: To what extent were you surprised by the interview discussing psychoactive plants?

As we can see in Figure 1, the research expectation was confirmed as seven participants out of ten declared themselves not at all surprised or surprised to a lesser extent by what they had seen after watching the first video. Conversely, the purpose of the second question was to allow us to compare the learners' reactions after watching both videos.

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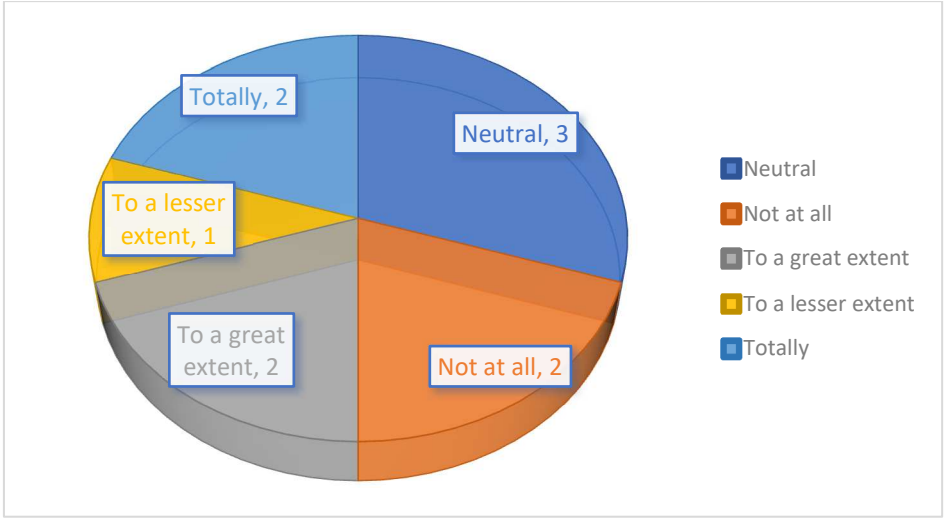


Figure 2. Question 2: To what extent were you surprised by the interview discussing the drinking of ether as a psychoactive substance?

The answers received confirm the research expectations. This time, seven out of ten students declared themselves either totally surprised or surprised to a great extent by the second video, which represents an almost symmetrically opposite response. Our hypothesis that the participants would be much more surprised by an example of use of psychotic substances in a highly regarded “traditional” community is confirmed. The interpretation of the result during the online class was done by making suggestions so that students could infer the explanation themselves.

The role of the third question was to try to capture the reason why most students were surprised. Four students declared their surprise to the fact that the people did not know ether was a dangerous substance that should not be ingested, three more said they were startled by the widespread use of the substance on traditional celebrations, two answered that they were astonished by how naturally people were discussing the ingestion of ether, and one participant was surprised by the way people mixed different substances in order to make ether palatable.

The fourth and fifth questions aimed at illustrating to what extent watching the two videos elicited feelings of repulsion, which is one of the feelings associated with culture shock.

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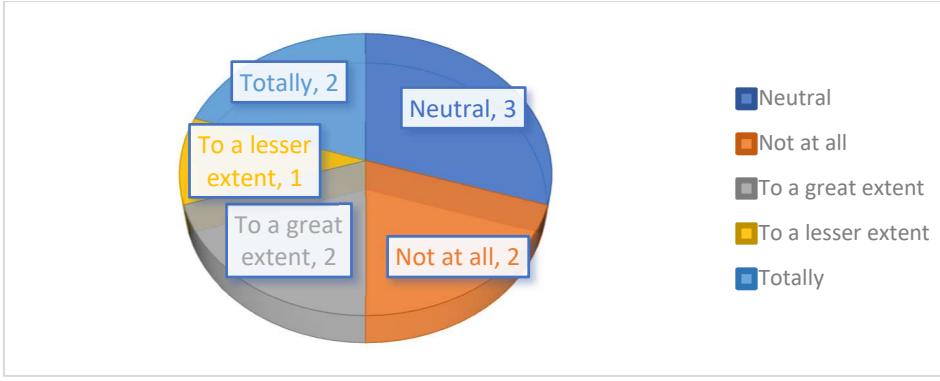


Figure 3.a. Question 4: To what extent the second video made you experience rejection?

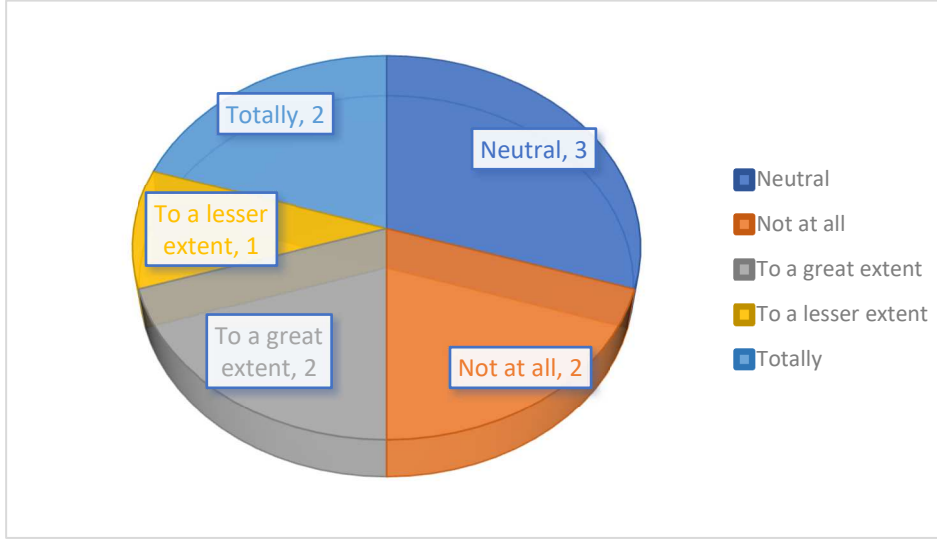


Figure 3.b. Question 5: To what extent the first video made you experience rejection?

The pie charts reveal that rejection was moderately felt by the participants. 60% of them felt very little repulsion or no repulsion at all after watching the oral history interviews about the intake of ether. Conversely, 50% felt total, great, or moderate repulsion after watching the video where teenagers discussed why it is legal to consume psychoactive plants but not marijuana. An interpretation of these results could be that even though the participants were less surprised by the video discussing the use of marijuana, they considered it more repulsive as a result of the various anti-drug media campaigns which take place in schools or are broadcast on national television or on social media platform. Presumably, the video which documented the habit of drinking ether

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seemed less repulsive because there are no media campaigns that give it a negative association, as it is a very limited and unheard-of practice.

The sixth question explores the way the extraordinariness of the phenomenon illustrated in the second video may have affected the participants' stereotypes regarding the traditional way of life in rural Bukovina.

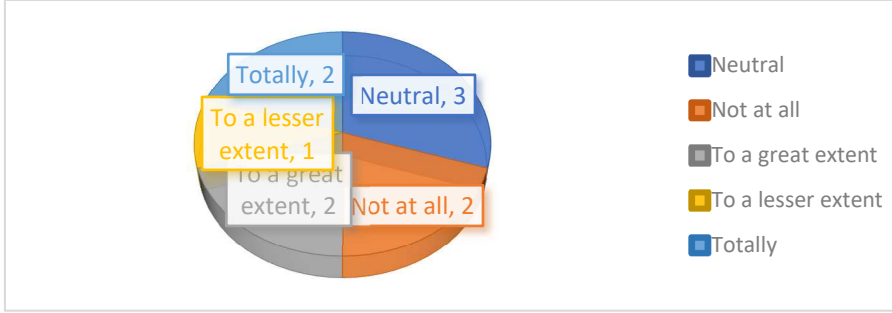


Figure 4. Question 6: To what extent watching the second video changed your perception of the idyllic Rădăuţi-Volovăţ area?

Most of the participants declared that their perception of the geographic area was either not changed at all or only changed a little and only three of them admitted that their opinion the idyllic Rădăuţi-Volovăţ area was challenged, proving that cultural perceptions or conceptions are difficult to influence.

Questions seven and eight both investigated the participant's ability of making assumptions regarding the similarity of the two social phenomena in the videos.

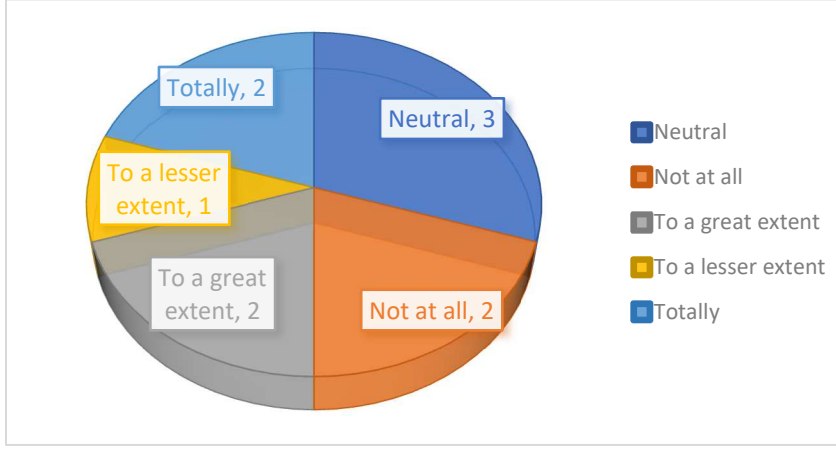


Figure 5.a. Question 7: Do you consider the two series of interview to be similar?

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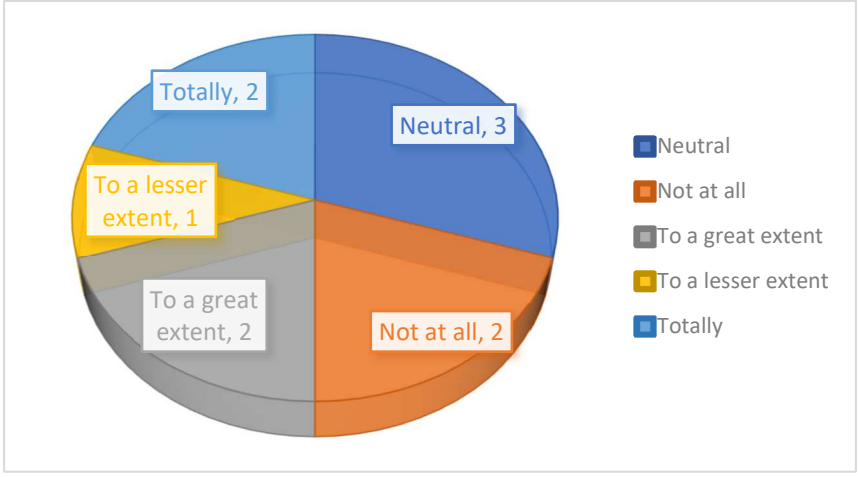


Figure 5.b. Question 8: Do you agree to the statement “Fundamentally, there is no difference between the habit of consuming psychoactive plants and the habit of consuming ether”?

Regarding question seven, seven participants considered the two interviews greatly or moderately similar. Correspondingly, regarding question eight, most students agreed that essentially the two examples of intake of intoxicants are comparable. As mentioned earlier, when discussing these results in class emphasis was laid on guiding the participants towards explaining why they felt surprised if, at the same time, they considered the two phenomena to be relatively similar. After each participant had expressed his/her point of view, culture shock due to cultural heterogeneity was proposed as a theoretical explanation.

Conclusions

In this article we have offered an example of using critical incidents in the online teaching of Intercultural communication skills to postgraduate students, while also including a survey of the theory behind the teaching methodology and some considerations on the importance of the taught content. The usage of web-based, digital methods should be encouraged not only because of the COVID pandemic, which has made universities transfer their teaching to online platforms, but also because

> In the realm of culture, traditional cultural texts, forms, and scholarly works are transformed, while new cultural practices are created. The emergence of virtual/augmented reality, as well as community, has generated new cultural forms and interactions, which in turn intervene and reshape the nonmedia forms, it is clear that our lives, both personal

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> and social, have come under the mediation of digital representation. The advent of digital technologies has greatly impacted the way society functions and how culture is (re/)mediated, (re/)produced, consumed, interpreted, and manipulated (Tso 5).

An advantage of using the online tools proposed in the activity is that the survey results can be generated instantly, and the participants can make inferences and discuss hypotheses based on the teaching activity they have taken part in. This would help the students to acquire an in-depth understanding of the concepts of Intercultural communication, while at the same time they would benefit from getting firsthand experience in techniques of academic research. According to other scholars in the field, "One convenient and student-friendly way to develop competences is the creative use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the educational process" (Chiper 1643). Thanks to the wide availability of information in the digital environment, not only are learners more prone to experiencing cultural encounters on a daily basis now than in the past, when studying almost exclusively took place in the campus lecture hall and library, but students should capitalize on the wide range of applications readily available on the internet that can be used in Intercultural communication research projects.

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