Article

The Transformative Learning Potential in the Hybrid Space Between Technology and Intercultural Encounters

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Abstract

As many higher education institutions strive to internationalize and develop graduates as global citizens, new technologies are supposed to be creating opportunities for geographically dispersed students to meet and develop intercultural skills. We argue, however, that there is scant evidence that these opportunities are being fully exploited. In this article, we explore some of the reasons for this by using the lens of "third space" theories to interpret data from a preliminary study of an international virtual exchange project. We found that although the project afforded some scope for critical intercultural learning, this was limited by two key factors related to the second space of the traditional classroom: the skills and attitudes of the lecturers and asymmetries in project goals. We conclude by arguing that unless higher education institutions provide more fertile conditions for projects like these, further opportunities for intercultural learning will be missed.

Keywords

virtual exchange, critical intercultural skills, third space, Europe

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, intercultural communication has become "a challenge of everyday life" (Ikas and Wagner, 2009, p. 1), a norm rather than an exception. This,

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together with the fast-paced changes in society, some of which are afforded by more accessible digital technology, has forced the higher education sector to try to adapt to the demands of this new and constantly changing environment through processes of internationalization and increased investment and research in educational technology. One way that internationalization strategies have dealt with the challenges has been through the concept of "Internationalisation at Home" or "Internationalization of the Curriculum," to prepare all graduates for a globalized world, both as professionals and as responsible global citizens (Deardorff & Jones, 2012; Leask, 2015). Advances and affordability of new media and contemporary technologies have also had an impact on education and learning (Aparicio et al., 2016). In this section, we aim to explore some of these changes in more detail and discuss how they may intersect to create new opportunities for intercultural learning.

Digital technologies have become ubiquitous throughout daily life for billions of people around the world, with more than four billion users in 2018 (Kemp, 2018), now a "necessary," rather than "a nice to have," tool in society. In educational settings, however, digital technology has been slow to emerge as some commentators highlight an unenthusiastic and sluggish approach founded on resistance for changing the status quo (Harrison et al., 2017; Weller & Anderson, 2013), despite calls to university leaders that "steady as she goes—is doomed to fail" (Barber et al., 2013). Resistance might also be based on evidence from studies in traditional classroom settings which suggest that digital technologies might encourage multitasking behaviors which result in poorer learning outcomes (McCoy, 2013; Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014; Sana et al., 2013).

Arguably one of the most visible of educational digital innovations is the establishment of online (or web-based) distance-learning courses sometimes referred as "eLearning," resulting in a first wave of digital educational disruption. With fully online distance learning (ODL), students are freed from the physical, geographically located buildings of educational institutions, giving unprecedented freedoms to when and where they study, and no longer forced to select institutions based on their ability to physically attend. It has major benefits in removing the need for visa requirements for students to leave and enter different countries. Noteworthy developments of ODL include the emergence of new educational providers, with alternative financial models to deliver free, online education (e.g., Massive Open Online Courses) and disrupting long-established educational institutions, with an "avalanche" of change (Barber et al., 2013). Furthermore, the adoption of Web 2.0 technology allows real-time interactive communication on a global scale. With far better online learning environments, students have the flexibility of switching between their desktop, laptop, tablet, or mobile phone as a conduit into their learning experience.

Some observers have described the above societal shifts as having a significant and positive impact on democracy in society (Kellner, 2004). As such, so long as people have access to the internet, educators and learners can experience a global virtual campus, creating opportunities to be immersed in new intercultural experiences, and develop associated skills. Yet, we argue that the educational potential of this intersection between internationalization and digital technology to promote intercultural

learning is perhaps more rhetoric than reality. Outside the field of language teaching and learning, the topic has been rarely examined. In the following section, we review the literature to discuss the concept of intercultural learning in relation to internationalization and the limited reports of the use of educational technology to promote intercultural learning in higher education. We then explore some of the reasons for this through the lens of theories of third space and data from a preliminary study of an online project.

Literature Review

Historically, higher education institutions (HEIs) have had some dimension of internationalization, influenced according to the social, political, and economic forces of the time (de Wit, 2017). During the past three decades, many HEIs around the world have focussed their energies on recruiting international students as an important source of income generation (Adams & de Wit, 2011). For example, 750,000 international students traveled to study in the United Kingdom, an increase of 30% over the past 9 years and worth more than £17.6 billion in 2015 (Migration Advisory Committee, 2018). More recently, there has been a recognition that universities need to be preparing all graduates for a globally dispersed workforce, and developing students' skills, knowledge, and values to become responsible and ethical global citizens (Haigh, 2014) through "internationalization of the curriculum" defined by Leask (2015) as

> the incorporation of international, intercultural and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods, and support services of a program of study. (p. 9)

Consequently, the need for learning intercultural skills is seen as paramount for healthy citizenship, and highly valued by both academics (Yusof et al., 2017) and employers (British Council, 2013; Jones, 2013). We support the growing body of literature arguing for a critical approach to developing intercultural skills (Djerasimovic, 2014; Singh, 2005) to reflect the reality that all communication is influenced by power relations (Fairclough, 1989) and that "culture is politically defined and politics are culturally defined" (Coulby, 2006, p. 251). Unfortunately, although a widely used term, defining "intercultural" remains problematic as it means many different things to different people (see for example Alexander et al., 2014). After discussing this problem, Dervin (2017), albeit reluctantly, provides a working definition of critical interculturality:

> It's a work in progress. It will never be finished [. . .] It's about becoming aware of, recognizing, pushing through, presenting/defending, and questioning [. . .] assumptions about one's identity or identifications, and diverse diversity [. . .] that diversity is only the other [. . .] as well as those of others. And re-negotiating them in a "satisfactory" [. . .] manner with and for our interlocutors in specific context, ad infinitum. (p. 18)

Given this understanding of critical interculturality and its perceived value, how do HEIs develop this mindset among faculty and their students? Do students automatically

develop intercultural skills by way of studying abroad and what evidence supports this assumption (Dervin, 2017, p. 10)? If HEIs continue to invest large sums in their budget for internationalization (Adams & de Wit, 2011; de Wit, 2011; Migration Advisory Committee, 2018), what evidence is this grounded on? We argue that these assumptions are basically flawed as study abroad does not necessarily lead to intercultural learning (Dervin, 2017; Jackson, 2018; Pederson, 2010). A related issue is the extent to which any skills that are developed through international experience can be transferred to the workplace as observable behaviors. A study by Predovic and Dennis (2019) used game-based analytics to compare different types of international experiences on various measures of employability. Interestingly, and perhaps rather surprisingly, the international internship was the only experience which significantly affected the skills most valued by employers such as quick thinking, learning agility, and creative insight. The main limitation of this study was the fact that the authors could not ascertain whether these skills had been developed as a result of the international internship, but further research using this approach to measuring employability skills could prove valuable in understanding the development potential of international experiences.

Another issue raised by Predovic and Dennis (2019), and perhaps of even greater concern, is that only a small proportion of students are benefiting from international experiences related to going abroad (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Egron-Polak & Hudson, 2014), and evidence from the Erasmus program suggests that those from less advantaged backgrounds are particularly underrepresented (Universities UK, 2019). So if we accept that intercultural skills are a necessity for students to be effective employees, and members of society, then could online learning environments be an alternative through intercultural exchanges or "virtual exchange" (O'Dowd, 2018; de Wit, 2017)?

Language programs in HEIs have a history of using telecollaboration or virtual exchange for more than two decades (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2017; O'Dowd 2016). A systematic review of 26 such studies by Çiftçi (2016), however, suggests that the majority of these have had a primary focus on developing the target foreign language skills with little or only superficial attention to intercultural skills. The value of virtual exchange is only just starting to be recognized by other disciplines. In business studies, for example, a few studies of relatively small-scale projects have begun to emerge (Lindner & Brien, 2019; Marchewka & Raina, 2019; Taras et al., 2013), and the X-Culture (n.d.) project brings together students from more than 40 countries to work with real companies. In these projects, students can experience working in global virtual teams (GVTs) and try to overcome some of the challenges associated with such projects, including those arising from intercultural communication.

In the humanities, the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) initiative connects HEIs in two different countries who are teaching similar courses (Rubin, 2016). Some of the projects resulting from the COIL initiative can be seen in the proceedings of their annual conference (SUNY, 2019). Although there has been a growth in the number of reports of virtual exchanges beyond the field of language learning, few provide convincing evidence of students developing critical intercultural competence (an exception to this is Li & Zhang, 2015). We postulate that the old assumption that students automatically develop intercultural skills from being on diverse

campuses is a deeply rooted belief held by academics and leaders in HEIs which has crossed over to the virtual world. In other words, it is assumed that students will develop intercultural skills automatically once they access the internet.

Given that transnational education in all its forms is increasing, with HEIs having cohorts of students often studying the same subject in various parts of the world, it seems that opportunities for virtual exchange are not as abundant as one would expect, and universities are not taking full advantage of the potential to develop critical intercultural competence. To investigate possible reasons for not didactically supporting the development of critical intercultural competence during online intercultural exchange, we believe it is helpful to explore the metaphors of third space. In this article, we understand the first space to be a student's home environment, the second space the classroom, and the third space the online environment.

The approach of using the third space metaphor to help better understand both culture and learning is not new, and there are a variety of conceptualisations and definitions of third space. In this article, we discuss both cultural and pedagogical perspectives by considering the "third space of enunciation" as posited by Bhabha (1988) and the "third space of pedagogy of literacy" (Kostogriz, 2002).

Bhabha's (1988) conceptualization of third space emerges from the analysis of culture in the postcolonial tradition. It reflects the understanding that when peoples from two different cultures meet, there are usually differences in power, the colonized and the colonizer, the marginalized and those who are not. For Bhabha, the third space is a hybrid or in-between space where the two cultures meet, the marginalized can have their voices heard, and both parties are transformed in some way by the experience. It is a "third space of enunication":

> It is in this space that we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this hybridity, this "Third Space," we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves. (Bhabha, 1988, p. 24)

The idea of emerging "as the others of ourselves" seems to be reflected in the earlier definition of critical intercultural learning by Dervin (2017, p. 18) which involves interlocutors self-interrogating assumptions about their own identities and those of the other. If the interlocutors reflectively transform their beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and emotional reactions which constitute their[1] "meaning schemes," then transformative learning can occur (Mezirow, 1991). Although Bhaba's view has been criticized for being too idealistic (Kalscheuer, 2009) in that the majority of those who are marginalized do not have the chance to be heard, it is recognized that his insights and others from postcolonial literature can contribute to the critical dimension of intercultural theories.

The metaphor of third space from a pedagogical perspective at first glance seems quite different from Bhabha's. Although also seen as a hybrid space, the pedagogical perspective often represents third space as the intersection between the first space of a student's home background, an informal space, and the second space of the traditional classroom, a formal space. Yet it bears similarities to Bhabha in terms of the fact that

it is a space where the local literacies of students, their "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992), from nondominant groups are not only recognized but also celebrated so that learning can become transformative (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 152), in Bhabha's view, where the marginalized can have their voices heard. This is what Kostogriz (2002) describes as the "third space of pedagogy of literacy."

Although there is the potential for transformative learning in this third space, this is more likely to be realized when scaffolded by the mutual relationships between lecturers, students, activities, and knowledge both inside and outside the school (Nash-Ditzel, & Brown, 2012). This scaffolding takes place within the learner's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) because learners can draw on their local literacy practices, and it involves a more capable peer or teacher providing the necessary support for the learner to extend their skills or knowledge. This is one of the reasons why just bringing students from different backgrounds together is unlikely to lead to the development of critical intercultural skills.

Schuck et al. (2017) expand this pedagogical view of third space to include not only the binary distinction between formal and informal space but also the physical and virtual distinction. Moreover, they emphasize the student-generated or student-initiated nature of third space and seem to be motivated by a desire to challenge the traditional school organization which they consider to be lacking in readiness to adjust to a changing world, in particular the new learning environments created by mobile technology (El-Hussein & Cronje, 2010, p. 20) such as "all the time, everywhere" learning (Norris & Soloway, 2013) and learning "on the move" (Sharples, 2013).

To summarize, we argue that there is some overlap in conceptualisations of the perspectives of Bhabha (1988) and Kostogriz (2002), and that the online learning environment has the potential of bringing these perspectives together. The online environment as a third space can therefore be understood as a hybrid (or perhaps even a hybrid-hybrid) space which has the potential for transformative learning and, in the context of intercultural encounters, can lead to critical intercultural learning, provided the necessary scaffolding is provided.

To explore this transformative learning potential, we used data from a pilot online learning project in a class from early childhood studies and used our perspective of third space theories to explain the findings.

Preliminary Study

Background

The online learning project aimed to enable the students to exchange knowledge regarding literacy practices in Danish and U.K. early childhood institutions and to discuss theoretical texts that the lecturers had uploaded. It took place in 2016 between two HEIs, one in the United Kingdom, and one in Denmark. The participants included 45 undergraduate students, 25 from the United Kingdom and 20 from Denmark, studying early childhood studies and four lecturers, two from Denmark and two from the United Kingdom. Over a 1-month period, the project involved four digital exchanges

of which the first was asynchronous, consisting of the exchange of video and learning materials. The following three exchanges were synchronous (via Skype) in groups of four to eight students from both the United Kingdom and Denmark. And both U.K. and Danish students stayed in the same student groups throughout the online learning project.

The project was set up as a pilot motivated by the U.K. partner, who had already developed an overall concept for an international online learning project. Nevertheless, the U.K. Early Childhood Department did not have any practical experience with unfolding this concept. Therefore, both partners identified the collaboration as a pilot and were motivated to test and extend their knowledge of the possibilities of the digital exchanges. The online learning project was integrated into existing modules of the early childhood studies programs in both the United Kingdom and Denmark but was only formally assessed at the U.K. institution.

Method of Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the two lecturers from the United Kingdom and the two lecturers from Denmark in Spring 2017. E-mail interviews were also conducted with the Danish students in one group 6 months after the project was finished. This was done to elaborate on student experience and the learning process. It was not possible to e-mail interview Danish students from the other groups as they were in practice placement and out of reach. All the English students reflected on their experiences and learning processes through an integrated written evaluation as part of their own module in the United Kingdom. E-mail interviews were not done with these students as their reflections and experiences were already documented. We also had access to the online discussion group set up between the U.K. and Danish students and which was embedded in the online course materials through Moodle as well as the lecturers' evaluations from U.K. (written) and Danish students (oral), which were formative aiming at stimulating student reflections on the online international encounters and exchange of knowledge. In addition, two of the authors of this article participated in the three synchronous digital exchanges, as they were able to observe the Danish students interact with the U.K. students through Skype. Two of the authors of this article were involved in the project and data collection, two were not.

Before analyzing the data, the authors had met on two occasions, once face-to-face, and once virtually. During these meetings, in-depth discussions of third space theory were conducted based on our own readings which led to a shared understanding of third space theory as outlined previously. The transcripts of the interviews and evaluations, as well as the observation notes, were analyzed independently by the four authors, first to identify key themes and then to apply third space theories to interpret those themes. After sharing our key themes and interpretations via e-mail, we met online to discuss our interpretations; from this discussion, a summary of the findings was cocreated.

Findings and Discussion

The findings from our analysis can be summarized in terms of the learning potential of the third space and the barriers to realizing that potential. The barriers fit into two main areas: (a) multiple and sometimes conflicting goals between lecturers and students, institutions and lecturers, and the two participating institutions, and (b) lecturer experience, attitudes, and skills. Each of these is discussed in more detail below using theories of third space.

The learning potential. The learning potential of the project is evidenced from one of the e-mail interviews with the Danish students:

> DK student: What I remember best is a story by an exchange student who was at the [UK] university. She was telling us about what it is like to be a child in China and be in a day-care institution there. The reason why I remember it best, were the extremely big differences there are between the different ways of being a child in the world.

This quotation from the Danish student serves to illustrate the "work in progress" of Dervin's (2017) critical interculturality. The Danish student remembers the personal story, the testimony of the Chinese student, and after recognizing the differences in culture, and perhaps questioning his own assumptions and identity, begins to look for, and then finds the similarities between the cultures: "being a child in the world." In this way, his focus has shifted from the concept of "culture," in the sense of a national culture, to the "inter," the relationship between the cultures, and by doing so creates a "collective third space" (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 153), or in Bhabha's words has emerged as "the others of ourselves."

This example mirrors the transformative potential for online cultural exchange demonstrated by Li and Zhang (2015). In this study, undergraduate students from a range of disciplines in a Canadian University participated in asynchronous online discussions on multicultural issues with students in a Hong Kong university over a period of 3 months. There was strong evidence that students developed not only cultural sensitivity but also critical cultural competence. It could be that one of the contributing success factors of this project was that the students in Canada were both linguistically and culturally diverse which enabled them to use their personal stories to explore their identities in their cultural, historical, and political contexts.

Multiple and conflicting goals. The lecturers in our study identified the project's potential for learning, but to some extent in a more utilitarian and practical way. For the U.K. lecturers, the project was also an opportunity to satisfy the institution's internationalization and digitalization agenda, aiming to develop intercultural competences and digital fluency.

From the evaluations of the online learning project, it was also clear though, that the digital exchanges sparked quite a lot of energy and motivation that was not always found in a regular learning environment, that is, the physical classroom. For instance,

the dialogues in the exchange pointed toward similarities and differences between the early childhood curricula and the rules and regulations on how to obtain and measure how young children learn. The students had actually never read their own national regulations, but the exchange motivated them to dig deeper, and read and explore their own systems in order for them to be able to continue dialogues with U.K. students.

Consequently, the lecturers from Denmark recognized a potential for excitement and creativity related to the more student-initiated learning approaches used within the online learning project. But they also recognized structural barriers for unfolding these potentials:

> DK lecturer: It was a means to get in contact with each other and they [the students] made some activities that fitted the medium [skype], they had to be creative [. . .] It was good and exciting, but I am afraid to miss something, because we talk about learning outcomes all the time [. . .] It was extremely fun, you could get quite high, there is a great potential, but it has to be structured so that there is room for it.

This quotation emphasizes the potential, but also suggests disappointment that this potential could not be reached because of various perceived barriers, such as the need to achieve learning outcomes and lack of time. Although both the U.K. and Danish institutions understood that the development of intercultural and digital competences should be a key aim of the project, these were not part of the formal learning outcomes which focussed more on the subject content matter (for instance, early childhood literacy practice). The intercultural and digital competences were understood as soft skills that could be achieved more indirectly without formalizing them. This was particularly the case in the Danish module where neither intercultural nor digital competences were formalized or integrated as part of the learning goals or as part of the assessment. In addition, the lecturers clearly demonstrated established understandings on how formal learning outcomes should be met. The online learning project in that sense challenged established understandings of teaching, and it also exposed the need to include intercultural and digital learning outcomes formally into the curriculum. As mentioned earlier, these skills do not develop automatically as many people assume, and traditional courses cannot be simply delivered "online" without any significant changes. A finding from the pilot is therefore that structural support, that is, formalizing intercultural and digital competences together with the subject content matter, is important to scaffold a learning environment that can foster intercultural and digital competences. In that sense, our study also supports the conclusions of, for instance, Leask (2015, p. 9) who stresses the importance of integrating intercultural dimensions not only into the content of the curriculum but also into the learning outcomes and the assessment tasks.

The lecturers recognized the learning potential of the third space but seemed to be trapped in the second space of the formal classroom and its associated structures. Asymmetries in institutional structures and lecturer/students' goals also limited the learning potential of the project. For example, some of the Danish students believed that the absence of any formal assessment in the Danish institution had reduced their

motivation; such institutional asymmetries are often a challenge to the success of virtual exchange (Caluianu, 2019). Another mismatch lay in the goals of the lecturers and the interests of the students. The lecturers wanted students to share knowledge and discuss theories, whereas the students were much more eager to focus on exchanged videos and on identifying similarities and differences between the U.K. and Danish systems, day care institutions, and early childhood pedagogical approaches. As discussed earlier, despite recognizing the potential value of what the students were doing, the structures of the second space made it difficult for lecturers to allow students to explore the possibilities of the third space. The multiple and sometimes conflicting goals also restricted time for student reflection during the project which, if scaffolded appropriately, may have provided more opportunities for cultural learning. In any project of this kind, both institutions need to have a shared understanding of the aims and objectives, and if a key outcome is the development of critical intercultural skills, there needs to be not only the time for students to explore this in their own way but also the staff with the necessary skills and experience to support students in their learning journey.

A practical guide for designing and implementing international projects is provided by John et al. (2017). The guide is based on their experience of projects in which students from different cultures and backgrounds work on real-world issues such as sustainability. Their interdisciplinary approach appears to be particularly valuable in terms of developing students' critical intercultural skills, and the guide provides guidance for HEI leaders in terms of strategy, for program and project managers in terms of curriculum design, and for lecturers in terms of learning and teaching environments. Jackson (2018) focusses mainly on students who are studying abroad, but course designers may find her suggestions for online intercultural pedagogy another useful resource.

The studies of Gutiérrez et al. (1995) have shown that third space can be an uncomfortable territory for lecturers, which is why they often retreat. Third space can also be an uncomfortable place for students as different cultures, values, thoughts, and languages are exposed and thus potentially challenged (Gutiérrez, 2008). Because student discomfort can lead to student dissatisfaction, another metric which can affect the career of a lecturer, it is no wonder that some lecturers prefer to remain in the more familiar second space.

Attitudes to technology. As well as the structures and ideology imposed by the second space, another related barrier to realizing the full learning potential of the project lay in attitudes to technology. As the previous quotation demonstrates, the Danish lecturers saw the project as a way for students to make contact with each other. But for the U.K. lecturers, although this was seen as a benefit, it was viewed merely as a precursor to the "real" meeting that would occur when the U.K. students visited Denmark in person. When asked how they would view the project if it had only been online, the response was this:

> UK lecturer: That is a good question you've asked. Because when we started the whole project, and I remember discussing this with A, and I told her that the cherry on the cake for me would be when our students meet face to face. Because that holds a lot of value. Yes, we know internationalisation is important, yes digital fluency is important, but personally from my perspective, the most important was that our students were to meet each other. Now, to your questions, if it was a project without any human interaction—I mean without any face to face interaction—I really wonder.

In a paper on virtual learning environments, Turoff (1995) concluded by stating "once we free ourselves from the mental limits of viewing this technology [virtual classroom]as a weak sister to face-to-face synchronous education, the potentials for revolutionizing education and learning become readily apparent" (p. 3). It seems that more than 20 years later, lecturers are still viewing interaction via technology as the "weak sister" of "real" face-to-face communication, and the potential for revolutionizing education is still a long way off. One of the reasons for this is that lecturers are not prepared for the new roles and practices that are required for online learning, as illustrated by the following quotation:

> UK lecturer: Yes, let the relationship build without holding their hands. That is something we want to take forward in our next [online learning project]. To make sure that they have a little bit more autonomy and we are not managing it so closely because they came a little bit: "hands back, we will wait until we are told what to do" and became a little bit reliant on us.

The lecturers clearly found it difficult to relinquish the control they normally exerted in the second space of the traditional classroom, even though they recognized that the students needed more autonomy. The lecturers also embedded the online project in primarily school-based practices, instead of drawing on the everyday online practices of the students themselves. "The expectation that staff will incorporate new and rapidly-advancing pedagogical practices" is one of the main challenges that academics face in terms of continuing professional development, and HEIs need to provide more flexible opportunities to support them (Rothwell & Rothwell, 2014), yet the evidence suggests they are left to sink or swim. The sink or swim approach is a risky one, when academics are judged by the performance and evaluations of their students, and students are measured by their achievement of learning outcomes. The Danish lecturers have not experienced these same managerial pressures to quite the same extent as the U.K. lecturers, but they still acknowledged the impossibility of letting go of the formal learning space to allow students to enter and explore the exciting but unpredictable and, therefore, risky third space. They recognized the fun and the exhilaration that existed, and the potential for creativity, but their reflections also show that they would have liked more time and permission to develop that potential. If HE curricula are to be truly internationalized for all, there has to be space on curricula for students to move beyond learning outcomes, or else we need to rethink the way that learning outcomes are articulated. There also needs to be time and support for lecturers to learn and develop ways to explore both technologies and pedagogies that truly are radical,

as well as develop the skills and knowledge required to facilitate critical intercultural learning. In order for virtual exchange to become mainstream, institutions may need to provide incentives for staff, strategy-level support, and changes to organizational culture which support innovation (Creelman & Löwe, 2019).

Limitations of the study. There are several limitations of this study. First, the findings are based on a single small-scale project between two institutions. Second, e-mail interviews were conducted with only one group of Danish students. Interviews with students from the United Kingdom and other groups of Danish students may have elicited different views and experiences. Moreover, face-to-face interviews may have been able to probe deeper into the student experience enabling a comparison with the lecturers' perspective. Because two of the authors were involved in the study, there is the potential for insider bias, although this was mitigated by the independent analysis of data by the two authors external to the project. Despite these limitations, the study has enabled us to highlight the potential value of virtual exchange for critical intercultural learning as well as some of the barriers to success.

Conclusion

The intersection between the internationalization of higher education and educational technology has been explored here using theories of third space. This study has demonstrated that the hybrid "third space" created when students from different cultures meet in a virtual environment can provide new and exciting opportunities for critical intercultural learning. However, the study also highlighted that the learning potential in projects such as these can be limited by the fact that many lecturers remain unable to escape some of the boundaries of the second space. This in turn restricts the opportunities for students to draw on their first space experience and knowledge to make learning transformative.

Critical intercultural skills are key for 21st century graduates, and virtual exchange has the potential to provide an inclusive approach for their development. However, to do so successfully, HEIs need to move beyond simply providing "international experiences," whether virtual or traditional in nature. First, this requires that leaders in HEIs have a good understanding of what critical intercultural skills are so that they can create interdisciplinary teams and ensure that not only are appropriate learning outcomes built into international projects but also that partners in the exchange have aligned goals. Only then can staff involved in international activities be provided with the necessary opportunities to develop the skills and knowledge to facilitate critical intercultural learning. This includes an understanding that students need the opportunity, time, and encouragement to draw on their first space knowledge and skills to transform their understanding of themselves. Second, policy makers and HE leaders need to find new ways to create environments which allow practitioners to extend learning beyond the traditional classroom as well as develop the confidence, skills, and knowledge required to do so. Until then, it seems online learning will continue to be seen as the "weak sister" of face-to-face learning, and further opportunities for critical intercultural learning will be missed.

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Note

1. Mezirow (1991) explains that meaning schemes are "made up of specific knowledge, beliefs, value judgements, and feelings that constitute interpretations of experience" (p. 5–6).

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