

## **Through Borrowed Eyes – Towards an Intercultural Way of Thinking**

Samuel C Lefever  
Assistant Professor  
Iceland University of Education

*This paper was presented at a conference with the title TOWARDS INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE IN EUROPE & BEYOND held by the University of Primorska in Koper, Slovenia, June 16-18, 2005*

### **Background**

Due to its geographical location in the North Atlantic and its island status, Iceland has been isolated from the larger world for long periods of its history. This has led to the development of a homogenous society of just under 300.000 inhabitants– primarily descendants of Vikings from Norway and the other Scandinavian countries. In recent years, however, immigration to the country has greatly increased. Many of these immigrants come from Asian countries like Vietnam, Thailand and the Phillipines, but people from Eastern Europe, for example Lithuanians and Poles, are also immigrating to Iceland in larger numbers. Statistics from the Icelandic Census Bureau show that the number of foreign citizens living in Iceland has more than doubled since 1995 and the number of people of foreign descent receiving Icelandic citizenship has more than tripled during the same period. The most recent statistics for the number of languages spoken in Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland, come from the city’s preschools. At the end of 2004, 630 preschool children in Reykjavik have parents who come from 89 different countries and 52 different languages are spoken by these children.

### **Objectives**

The teaching approach discussed in this paper was used in a course within the English language teaching department of Iceland University of Education, the second largest university in the country with a student population of about 2500. The university offers teacher education programs at the preschool, primary and lower-secondary levels as well as programs in other fields of education and training.

The participants in the course were students in the English language teaching program. The focus of the course was on multiculturalism with the aim of increasing the

intercultural awareness of the students. The approach was largely designed by my colleague, Ragnheiður Jónsdóttir, as a part of her doctoral dissertation. The goal of the approach was to help the students explore their attitudes towards people with other backgrounds and investigate and uncover negative attitudes in Icelandic society towards foreigners.

The objectives of the course were two-fold. One objective was to assist the students in preparing for their role as teachers in the multicultural classrooms of changing Icelandic society. The second objective was to encourage personal development, i.e. to raise students' awareness and better equip them for living in a multicultural society.

### **The teaching approach**

The approach used in the course focused on issues of difference in terms of race, ethnicity and language background and was built on tasks and activities that encouraged students to put themselves in others' footsteps and see things from different perspectives. The curricular design included the use of class discussions, reaction papers, student journals, reflection through literature, personal contact with a foreigner, and student projects. Issues were explored from two realms, a personal one and a social one. The approach began with critical reflection from within the personal realm.

### **The personal realm**

Icelanders tend to assume a common national identity based on a common language, heritage and struggle with the harshness of the weather and nature in the country. In the first session, students were asked to explore this common Icelandic national identity. What common characteristics, values, beliefs, etc. can be attributed to Icelandic people? Next students were asked to consider whether they fit the description of Icelandic national identity and/or in what ways they might be at odds with it.

This initial reflection and discussion served as a starting point for the students and the teacher to be compared and contrasted with students' final assessment of the insights gained through the activities and tasks of the course. It also mapped students' previous experiences and gave the teacher a clearer picture of their knowledge and experience. Students were asked to keep a journal during the course. Journal writing was an important element of the approach because it enabled students to 'think on paper' and develop and discover new knowledge. It helped them to capture the total experience,

reflect upon it and develop a new awareness. It also provided the students with a venue for inner debate, which was necessary, particularly if they were not happy with what they began to see in their society or themselves.

The next step of the personal realm was to encourage students to share personal experiences of having been an outsider or different in some way. Many students shared their experiences of having lived abroad or other situations in which they had tried to enter a new community. Others told about personal connections they had with foreigners living in Iceland. All of the students were encouraged to reflect on what it might feel like to be a foreigner in Iceland trying to enter the community of Icelanders. Sharing of personal stories of being foreign or different in a situation served to show how common the experience is. Everyone has been an 'outsider' in some sense of the word. By sharing their experiences, students gained a sense of belonging to a group and learned to empathize with others.

The next set of activities in the course was the reading of literary texts dealing with the challenges faced by individuals when they move to new countries or interact with other cultural groups. The first text was a short story by a popular Icelandic author which examines the difficulties faced by Icelandic settlers in the Canadian frontier. The settlers struggled with adapting to the 'promised land' and redefining their identity as Icelanders displaced from everything they had previously known and experienced. This story was chosen to underline to the students that the experience of being foreign or an outsider is a common one that many people, including their own, have experienced. Another short story which looked at the cross-cultural and cross-generational difficulties experienced by an immigrant family was also read and discussed. The story gave insight into the problems involved in assimilating into a new society and learning to accept new norms and customs while trying to hold on to values and beliefs from the home culture. Finally, the novel, "The Bluest Eye" by Toni Morrison was read and discussed. The novel caused students to explore their attitudes towards racial prejudice and the personal and social destruction it leaves in its wake.

The reading of literary texts provided students with a deeply engaging experience and gave them an opportunity to identify with a character in a certain situation; to be in the character's shoes and try on his/her thoughts and feelings. The purpose of this

approach, instead of presenting students with research findings, for example, was to have their heart enter the equation and help them develop empathy for the circumstances of people trying to cope with a new set of circumstances. Furthermore, the exposure to literature helped students imagine different ways of being in the world, and thus helped enlarge their cultural models to include more diversity and different ways of being.

### **The social realm**

At this point in the course the focus shifted to the social realm. Guest lecturers from the Intercultural Center in Iceland visited the class and provided information about the situation of immigrants in the country, in particular their experiences of encountering stereotypes and prejudice in Iceland. This was an eye-opener for many of the students and set the stage for a critical analysis of Icelandic media and popular culture. Students looked for evidence of social responses to newcomers or foreigners and attitudes towards them, both welcoming and hostile. This task gave students the opportunity to see things from a different perspective and notice things which they may not notice on an everyday basis, thus uncovering subtle instances of racism and prejudice towards foreigners and people with other backgrounds in Iceland.

Next students made contact with foreigners living in Iceland and talked with them about their experiences of adjusting to life in the country and their interaction with Icelanders. By hearing stories of immigrants' actual experiences, students could connect the attitudes and prejudices seen in the media to real people with real feelings, and they become more personalized and urgent to them. The stories raised students' awareness and help them to critical reflect on their own lives and community. And through sharing the interviews in the group, the students became more aware of the wide range of experiences and individual complexities of being a foreigner. The activity made it clear that the foreigner is not just a part of a group of people, but a unique individual with unique life experiences.

The course concluded with a final project in which students were asked to put themselves in the shoes of an imagined foreigner living in Iceland and present their newly-gained insights through a first person perspective, in other words, through 'borrowed eyes'. Students decided for themselves the gender, age, family status, area of

origin, etc. of the imagined foreigner and the method and type of presentation, for example, poetry, storytelling, drama, video or other visual form.

### **The key factors**

The curricular design of the approach emphasized the importance of achieving an emotional connection with the issues - **prior to** looking at the social realities facing foreigners in Icelandic society - **in order to** instill feelings of empathy and responsibility in the participants in the course. This is the key to true understanding; when students experience the issues from the heart and can see through ‘borrowed eyes’, they are ready to look at the issues on a larger, societal scale. This helps prevent them from feeling the need to automatically defend their society and to recognize their own responsibility for improving it. When students ‘try on other’s’ points of view’ it helps bring the issues closer to home and underlines that what they have experienced are individual human insights, not research findings or impersonal generalizations.

### **Results**

The outcomes of the course were positive. Almost all the students’ eyes were opened; they learned to notice subtle prejudice and stereotypes, both within themselves and in Icelandic society. It was clear that the ‘borrowed eyes’ had helped them to become better informed, more reflective and socially aware. They saw the need for increased intercultural understanding in Icelandic schools and society in general. Many of the students felt that education and awareness raising of this kind should be a required part of their teacher education. Their understanding and tolerance for others increased and many of them felt challenged to take an active stance and work for change in society and within the school system. Clearly, the students were better prepared at the end of the course for living in a multicultural society and for meeting the demands placed on teachers in classrooms with diverse groups of children.

### **Comments from students**

The following comments made by students in their journals and class evaluations illustrate the positive outcomes and personal development they experienced.

*“Maybe my prejudice is a combination of prejudice and fear for the things I do not know or how to handle, like disabled people. I try to avoid them because I do not really know how to act around them and that is based on fear of the unknown.”*

*“The subjects we covered made me think of things that I had never really thought of before. I have never before ‘tried on the shoes’ of an Asian woman in Iceland. I discovered within myself thoughts and beliefs that needed revision. I found out that many of my values and assumptions I take from my surroundings, media, family and religion. I am now better aware and more careful and selective on things I let influence me.”*

*“In short I know this course has sowed seeds in my mind. To help them grow I have to nurture them and be constantly on the alert to keep them alive.”*

*“I will after this course make it ‘my mission’ to do everything in my power to inform and educate young people about this issue. If ‘we’ let this go on without doing anything it will be all down hill from now on.”*

*“This course cannot be measured by conventional methods. The only yardstick I can use are my feelings.”*

## **Conclusion**

It is important that students, and all people, be given an opportunity to search their souls and their community for signs of prejudice if they are to become motivated to work against it. If what they hear, read, and see begins to touch their heart, what they learn through the experiences of others will become more meaningful. The teaching approach used in the course provided students with such an opportunity. It was a rewarding experience for both the instructors and the students. Most importantly, it helped the students to see a fuller view of the world and develop an intercultural way of thinking, which is essential for teachers in the multicultural classrooms of today’s Europe.