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HYBRID INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE GROUP WORK ON DIGITALIZATION IN ADULT EDUCATION AND LEARNING: AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY ON THE JOURNEY OF THE MODERATORS AND PARTICIPANTS

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyse the experiences of two moderators and two participants in an International Comparative Group Work on Digitalization in Adult Education and Learning, which was organised through a hybrid mode of delivery, to provide intercultural perspectives that can inform the understanding of instructional designers and adult educators, as well as other practitioners involved in the digitalization of adult education. Hybrid learning and intercultural learning theory informed the conceptual framework of this study. This is a qualitative research study, which used collaborative autoethnography as the methodology for the overall inquiry. The researchers used their autobiographical stories to analyse their lived experiences throughout their journey interacting in the international comparative group work. The results show that design features related to the planning and implementation of the hybrid international comparative group work on digitalization in adult education and learning enabled the moderators and the participants to experience intercultural learning.

Keywords: *comparative education, intercultural competence, internationalization, distance learning, remote learning*

HIBRIDNO MEDNARODNO PRIMERJALNO SKUPINSKO DELO O DIGITALIZACIJI V IZOBRAŽEVANJU IN UČENJU ODRASLIH: AVTOETNOGRAFIJA O IZKUŠNJA MODERATORJEV IN UDELEŽENCEV – POVZETEK

Cilj študije je bil analizirati izkušnje dveh moderatorjev in dveh udeležencev mednarodnega primerjalnega skupinskega dela o digitalizaciji v izobraževanju in učenju odraslih, ki je temeljilo na hibridnem načinu

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izvajanja, da bi zagotovili medkulturne perspektive, ki lahko prispevajo k boljšemu razumevanju oblikovalcev navodil in izobraževalcev odraslih ter drugih izvajalcev, vključenih v digitalizacijo izobraževanja odraslih. Konceptualni okvir te kvalitativne raziskovalne študije sta oblikovala hibridno učenje in teorija medkulturnega učenja. Uporabljena je bila metodologija kolaborativne avtoetnografije, kjer so raziskovalci na podlagi svojih avtobiografskih zgodb analizirali svoje izkušnje sodelovanja v mednarodnem primerjalnem skupinskem delu. Rezultati kažejo, da so oblikovne značilnosti, povezane z načrtovanjem in izvedbo hibridnega mednarodnega primerjalnega skupinskega dela o digitalizaciji v izobraževanju in učenju odraslih, moderatorjem in udeležencem omogočile izkušnjo medkulturnega učenja.

Ključne besede: *primerjalna pedagogika, medkulturne kompetence, internacionalizacija, učenje na daljavo*

INTRODUCTION

The past decades have witnessed unprecedented processes of digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation in education at all levels and forms, including adult education and lifelong learning. However, despite the literature that supports the effectiveness of online learning (Hiltz & Goldman, 2004; Smith et al., 2021) and hybrid teaching and learning (Castro, 2019), the quality and significance of digitally mediated education have been challenged (Harrison et al., 2017). The increased sophistication of digital technologies (Aparicio et al., 2016) and the isolation that the global pandemic corona virus (Covid-19) imposed on face-to-face human interactions further accelerated the digital transformation of education. For instance, at some point during the Covid-19 lockdown, teaching and learning could only occur online/remotely in most parts of the world (UNESCO, 2021). Even the stakeholders vehemently opposed to online and hybrid education had to embark on education mediated by digital technologies. However, once the Covid-19 lockdown was lifted, criticisms about the quality and challenges of online and hybrid education have resurfaced (Adel & Dayan, 2021; Yang et al., 2023). Part of the criticism or resistance to online and hybrid education lies in the inability of many educators to design a hybrid curriculum (Rothwell & Rothwell, 2014), as well as the challenge to design online or hybrid courses that are inclusive and equitable for all learners. In addition, this may be an even more daunting task when online or hybrid courses include learners from different national and cultural backgrounds (Lawrence, 2013). The 2024 Adult Education Academy (AEA24) at the University of Würzburg in Germany happens to be a program that affords groups of adult learners and practitioners from various national and cultural backgrounds the opportunity to attend a comparative group on digitalization of adult education and learning through a hybrid mode of delivery. The challenge reconnects to one of the main criticisms of online or hybrid teaching and learning: How did the AEA24 comparative group design interact with the international and intercultural profiles of the participants from various countries around the world?

To address this question, a collaborative autoethnographic study was initiated to analyse the experiences of two moderators and two participants in the AEA24, and consequently provide intercultural perspectives that can inform the understanding of instructional

designers and adult educators, as well as other practitioners involved in the digitalization of adult education. More specifically, the study sought to understand the perspectives of both the moderators and participants on the design and process of their learning experiences, as well as on the curriculum and instructional design factors that influence their learning.

CONTEXT AND PROFILE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE GROUP WORK ON DIGITALIZATION IN ADULT EDUCATION AND LEARNING

Every February, the Professorship for Adult and Continuing Education at the University of Würzburg (Germany) hosts the Adult Education Academy (AEA), where students, colleagues from the field (referred to as practitioners), and lecturers from around the world gather to exchange perspectives on international adult education and lifelong learning. This study concerns the AEA for the period 2023–2024 in Würzburg, Germany, which we referred to as AEA24. The AEA24 consisted of three consecutive work phases: (1) the planning phase, (2) the online phase, and (3) the hybrid phase. These phases primarily characterise the AEA24. The planning phase followed a backward design approach, which was to reflect on and develop the learning outcomes. In the online phase, students worked independently on tasks in preparation for the final phase of the comparative group. They exclusively engaged through online synchronous and asynchronous instructional activities, using a learning management system, emails, and other social media communication tools. The hybrid phase occurred during the second week of the AEA. Some participants were in the same physical location (in Würzburg, Germany) as the moderators, while other participants joined synchronously online from their respective countries. The group included a dual national moderator from the U.S., a co-moderator from Germany, and participants from the following countries: Brazil, Georgia, Italy, Jordan, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, and Portugal.

BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of this study was informed by hybrid learning and intercultural learning constructs.

Hybrid learning

According to Garrison and Kanuka (2004), blended learning is “a thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” (p. 96). Similarly, Mitchell and Honore (2007) describe hybrid learning as a mixture of face-to-face interactions with online communication. This is why conceptually, hybrid learning and blended learning are used interchangeably (Smith & Hill, 2019). It is important to acknowledge that several scholars admit that there is a complexity in the way that hybrid teaching and blended teaching are defined (Jean-Francois, 2012; Klimova & Kacetl, 2015; Smith & Hill, 2019). Shaping relationships under the conditions of digitality plays a fundamental role in participants’ learning processes (Mayrberger, 2020, p. 61). These

include formal, non-formal, and informal teaching and learning processes intending to empower teachers, learners, and organisations to proactively participate in the design of appropriate curricula (Mayrberger, 2020, p. 88). Briefly, hybrid learning refers to the synchronous duality of real-world and virtual spaces, with social relationships playing a special role in holding virtual and physical space together. Hybrid teaching and learning settings include learners who are physically located in different locations, and sometimes with different cultural backgrounds and life experiences. As such the design of hybrid modules as well as their instructional implementation may interact with intercultural processes, which carry potential for cross-cultural conflicts on one hand or intercultural learning on the other hand.

Intercultural learning

The intercultural learning theory asserts that interactions among people from different cultures may lead to cross-cultural awareness, knowledge, behaviour, and understanding (Amorim, 2001; Armstrong, 2008). During an intercultural learning process, one's identity can be challenged by others based on their assumptions related to otherness. Therefore, there is a potential for intercultural conflicts that could positively or negatively affect the learning experience. The ability to navigate through implicit or explicit conflicts during intercultural interactions helps partners from different cultural backgrounds learn about themselves and others, and consequently develop intercultural understanding. In an international hybrid learning setting, intercultural learning could be a challenge for participants who may have significant differences in cultural perceptions and attitudes (Kaputa et al., 2022). Accessibility may support intercultural interactions and facilitate the exchange of diverse national and cultural perspectives. However, the potential for meaningful learning by participants may be limited due to the lack of technological and digital teaching skills of many instructors who are unable to overcome the boundaries of traditional teaching (Lawrence, 2013). In an international hybrid teaching and learning setting, a reciprocal relationship between instructors and students from different cultural backgrounds may help contribute to supporting learning processes and experiences (Nash-Ditzel & Brown, 2012). The intercultural learning theory informing the conceptual framework of this study may help analyse the design features of hybrid teaching settings that promote learning to overcome cultural differences.

METHODOLOGY: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

This study used collaborative autoethnography as a qualitative method that enables the researchers to be ethnographers and research participants who self-inquire about their lived experiences regarding a phenomenon (Adams et al., 2015; Denzin, 2014). An individual researcher or a group of researchers may conduct an autoethnography. An autoethnography conducted by a group of researchers is called collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2012). This study involves a team of researchers who share a collective lived experience regarding the AEA24. Collaborative autoethnography is an appropriate

method for this study because it allows the researchers to engage in metacognitive and introspective self-inquiries that generate lessons learned from their experiences, which can help inform practice and scholarship. Two research questions guided the process: (1) How did the moderators and participants account for the underlying cultural differences in the planning phase of the hybrid international work group on digitalization in adult education and learning? (2) How did the moderators and participants interculturally navigate through the implementation of the hybrid international work group on digitalization in adult education and learning?

The investigative process started with a systematic retro self-observation (Chang, 2016). Each of us made a genuine effort to recall our involvement and experiences with the planning and implementing of the AEA24 in our respective capacities as moderators and participants. A self-developed questionnaire was used to ensure a systematic recollection of our experiences with the AEA24. After ensuring its validation, each researcher completed the questionnaire based on the relevance of any given question to their position in the AEA24. This helped us create raw data about our thoughts, feelings, behaviours, actions, and reactions during the planning and implementation of the AEA24. To triangulate our data, we retrieved documents and communications that were produced during both the planning and the implementation of the AEA24. Then, we used the data to identify emerging patterns. While the participants preferred to report their findings in a narrative format, the moderators used the emerging patterns to generate themes that would constitute our findings. Finally, we analysed the findings through the lens of the themes and the constructs from our conceptual framework.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section reports on the findings addressing the research questions related to the study.

Findings for Research Question 1

Moderator's Perspective

During the planning of the AEA24, I relied on my experience of conducting research on the underlying cultural differences in international work groups, collaborating with colleagues from various countries in the world, and teaching graduate students from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, North America, and the Middle East. So, my first reflex was to be intentional about cross-cultural awareness, cross-cultural sensitivity and validation (i.e., respect, appreciation, and critique), and cross-cultural communication.

Cross-cultural awareness, cross-cultural sensitivity and validation (respect, appreciation, and critique), and cross-cultural communication. I started with a personal reflection on the idea that intercultural/global competence is valid only in specific contexts. My position is that nobody is completely interculturally/globally competent regardless of how many languages they speak or countries they have lived in or visited. Intercultural/global competence

refers to the awareness of cultural differences, knowledge of other cultures, skills for intercultural interactions, and dispositions in intercultural communications. With that in mind, every human being will be limited in their intercultural/global competence because of the dynamics of power and influence among world cultures, civilization biases, as well as individual personalities, backgrounds, and privileges. The point is that intercultural/global competence is possible only in context, only within the context of a culture of which one can claim legitimate awareness, knowledge, and understanding. I used the term *glocal competence* to refer to intercultural/global competence in context, which is the utilization of global frameworks, approaches, or constructs to issues and practices in local contexts (Jean-Francois, 2015). During the planning of the hybrid international work group on digitalization in adult education and learning, I preferred to embrace the term *glocal competence*, and used its constructs to intentionally identify resources, guidelines, activities for the implementation phase.

Sharing, conversation, task delegation, time management, and deliberation. The planning that involved the design of the hybrid module was also informed by the twelve principles of transnational innovative teaching: imagination-driven, learner-centred learning outcomes, empowering additional ownership for learning, novel student engagement experiences, novel teaching patterns, *glocal-minded* pedagogy, integration of learner technology literacy, reliance on flexible expectations, reliance on fair/adjustable accountability, using failure as an asset for learning, built-in fun in learning, and comprehensive assessment (Jean-Francois, 2018). These principles carry seeds that foster *glocal competence*, which is based on an assumption that during an intercultural collaboration, intercultural learning occurs through intercultural sharing, conversation, reflexivity, task delegation, time management, and deliberation. A key prerequisite is to ensure that guidelines exist to facilitate digital integration.

Developing guidelines for in-person and online integration. One of our key documents that charted the principles for digital integration was the *netiquette guidelines*. The term *netiquette* refers to the rules and social norms that regulate interactions in teaching mediated by digital technologies (Heitmayer & Schimmelpfennig, 2023; Soler-Costa et al., 2021). Netiquette guidelines have been developed primarily for online courses. In the context of the AEA24, the netiquette guidelines were developed for a hybrid learning environment. The netiquette guidelines included five sections on (1) the technology requirements and skills, (2) digital tools, (3) attendance expectations, (4) proper online behaviour, and (5) proper blended behaviour (Jean-Francois & Rosemann, 2023, p. 3).

Planning for spontaneity, humility, and flexibility. Participants in international groups bring with them the assumptions, stereotypes, and biases that feed their cultural mental models. I am aware of that through my own reflexivity, my various travels around the world, my interactions with individuals from all walks of life, including international students that I have had in my courses over the years. Planning for spontaneity, humility, and flexibility helps not only anticipate awkwardness, but also carries the remedies to overcome and come out of one's shell and develop more honest and authentic interactions. In planning,

I did not necessarily know which countries the participants would be from and what their global experience would be. However, I planned to be intentional about modelling vulnerability through spontaneity, humility, and flexibility.

Reflective practice. The AEA24 is based inherently on multifaceted collaborations. There was collaboration between the moderator and co-moderator, who had to not only plan the facilitation of intercultural collaboration of the participants during the implementation, but also practise such intercultural collaboration during both the planning and the implementation phases. It is my assumption that one cannot plan and implement the facilitation of effective intercultural collaborations without experiencing it themselves. So, the co-moderator and myself had to regularly engage in intercultural reflective practices during the planning process to ensure that we facilitated effective intercultural collaboration among the participants, while accounting for the hybrid format of the group.

Co-Moderator's Perspective

The preparation phase of the hybrid international comparative group was an intensive and multifaceted experience that involved both technical and communicative challenges. The following aspects were particularly crucial for the successful planning phase of the hybrid comparative group:

Regular meetings of the moderators to prepare for the comparative group. The regular meetings between the moderators were crucial for structuring and fine-tuning the comparative group. These meetings provided opportunities to discuss the content, agree on the methodology/pedagogy, and clearly allocate responsibilities. Through this collaborative planning, we were able to ensure that all moderators were on the same page and developed a unified vision for the comparative group. This teamwork was not only efficient, but also strengthened trust and co-operation between the moderators who are from different countries.

First digital meeting with the group in the online phase. A particularly important step was the first meeting with the entire group, in which the formal conditions of the comparative group were discussed, and the moderators provided an initial insight into the content of the topic. This meeting served to create a standardised understanding of the key concepts such as digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation. By clarifying these terms, we ensured that all participants worked with the same definitions and created a common understanding. This not only helped avoid misunderstandings, but also enabled a deeper and more informed discussion of the comparative group theme.

Promoting intercultural learning processes through the use of digital media and tools. An essential part of the co-moderators' seminar preparation was providing technical support to the students. This involved not only setting up the Moodle learning management platform for the comparative group, but also ensuring that all participants had access to it and could navigate the system safely and effectively. Technical support involved working together to resolve issues that required both patience and precise communication to resolve technical

difficulties quickly to ensure a smooth learning experience. Only once all participants had secured access to the digital media and tools used for communication and interaction could intercultural learning processes be initiated for all participants.

Promoting intercultural communication by setting up an online messenger group. The creation of an online messenger group proved to be an important step in promoting communication and coordination between the participants and the moderators. This informal communication platform enabled a quick and direct exchange between all participants. The group helped to clarify spontaneous questions, send reminders to all participants, and share relevant information and materials in an uncomplicated way that was flexible in terms of location and time. This not only facilitated the organisational process of the hybrid comparative group, but also promoted an atmosphere of positivity, commitment and familiarity among the participants.

Reflection. Through the use of digital media and tools, various digital spaces of opportunity were created in the context of the synchronous-hybrid teaching and learning setting, which supported the intercultural learning processes between the face-to-face and online participants. Over the course of the three phases of the comparative group, the online messenger group, in particular, developed into a central (digital) meeting space that enabled, for example, intercultural group work using voice messages and communication between all participants in a way that was sensitive to time and geographic location. Overall, this virtual space functioned as a form of *safe room* to address issues, especially when technical problems arose with the video conferencing system that led to delays. In the meeting room it was uniquely possible to quickly establish contact with the online participants to ensure everyone's participation and prevent longer interruptions.

Participants' Perspectives

Participant 1. I started working to attend Adult Education Academy from the month of October 2023. There were plenty of readings to complete during the first phase or the online session of the program, which preceded the face-to-face sessions. The readings were a preparation to get deeper insight into the different adult education theories. They also served me as resources to help write my essay on digitalization of adult education and learning in Pakistan. The moderators had posted some resources about digital education policy. However, to write my essay I needed more published facts and figures from Pakistan. I spent a lot of my time searching for the data published pre and post Covid-19 on the digitalization of adult education in Pakistan to prepare my essay. This data gathering and analysis not only helped me in writing my essay but also prepared me with data and statistics to share with my group members in the second week of the AEA24, when I presented the gist of my essay in the form of a PowerPoint.

Participant 2. I learned about the Adult Education Academy through a lecturer in the Adult Education Department at my university. It did not take long for me to decide. I saw the Adult Education Academy as a wonderful opportunity for me to travel outside of Nigeria. I did not waste any time before I applied and filled in all the necessary documents

required for my participation. I did not have any assumptions about hybrid learning. I was aware that hybrid learning involves physical and online learning. I was excited to take part in the virtual learning. In preparation for the travelling, I engaged one of the international students from the University of Lagos' adult education department in a series of discussions on (i) how to book an appointment for my visa, (ii) the collection of necessary documents such as health insurance, a letter of invitation from the University of Wurzburg, (iii) the visa application, and (iv) visiting the embassy for an interview. The international student helped me apply for the electric bus and tickets, as well as suggested appropriate clothing to cope with the winter weather in Germany. He provided the necessary financial assistance to get accommodation not only for me but also for other colleagues from the University of Lagos. The cost of accommodation brought the three of us from the University of Lagos together in one apartment in Germany. As a result of our stay together, the expenses for upkeep were reduced because goods were purchased in bulk through the money contributed by each participant. This really helped cut down individual cost of living during this time in Germany. Hence, we were able to cope with life in Germany during our stay. During the planning, all communications occurred through emails. And all my questions were answered appropriately.

Findings for Research Question 2

This section addresses the findings related to research question 2.

Moderator's Perspective

Authentic trust in co-moderator. The third day of the second week was very stressful for the participants. They did not express that, but I knew. I stepped out of the room and left the group with the co-moderator, whom I authentically trust. A trusted co-moderator will genuinely make observations that can help improve the process. When I returned, I could see that some participants were exhausted and were silently begging for help. I used my spontaneity to address them, provided some words of encouragement, but did not prescribe anything because it was at the end of the day. I wanted to make sure I spoke with my co-moderator before I could decide how to proceed. After the participants left, I had a debriefing with my co-moderator, and she authentically said, "They were struggling. They need more help". It was the sweetest thing that I could have heard. It was a confirmation of my trust in my co-moderator. She did not try to tell me what she might have thought I wanted to hear. She told me what she believed could help me help the group. We had a comprehensive conversation about how to move forward. This authenticity helped me use my experience to provide more detailed guidance to the participants.

Fostering vulnerability and intercultural tolerance. During the online phase, we had ice breaker and interactive activities that allowed for personal openness, jokes, self-deprecation, and laughter. We met the participants for the first time in-person and online during the second week of the Academy in Wurzburg. During the first day of the hybrid phase, we had interactive ice breaker activities. The evening of the first day of the hybrid session,

we had an informal dinner at a restaurant where we shared a meal, drinks, and played a fun game. By the second day, the participants were vulnerably familiar with each other. They made themselves vulnerable to connect with others and let others reciprocate. Throughout the hybrid phase, jokes, self-deprecation, singing, dancing, and laughter were always present to allow participants and moderators to be productive and have fun at the same time.

Comprehensive hybridity. The strength of the facilitation of an international group work in a hybrid format resides in its comprehensive hybridity. By comprehensive hybridity, I mean the integration of online and in-person participants throughout the comparative group work, the presentation of the findings, and the evaluation of the session. The integration depends on the intentionality, planning, and persistence of the moderator to keep the hybridisation alive. Intentionality is partly based on a belief that hybrid teaching and learning is possible, valid, and can be carried out efficiently and effectively. Furthermore, persistence is key for the successful facilitation of intercultural group work. Persistence with yourself, the co-moderator, and the participants enables all stakeholders to be reminded constantly that some of us are in-person and others are online. The participants became intentional about in-person and online integration throughout the process.

Inclusive and equitable democratic deliberation. Throughout the process, I was intentional about inclusive, equitable, and democratic deliberation. Every voice needed to be heard. Then, we discussed and deliberated. It was challenging at times, because the group included participants from different backgrounds, perspectives and working habits. However, we did not deviate. The intercultural makeup of the group was an asset for democratic, inclusive, and equitable deliberations.

Organic leadership emergence. During our hybrid international group work, multiple leaders emerged among the in-person and online participants. This facilitated rich intercultural interactions. Too many leaders in a team or a group can be a deterrent at times if there is not a clear sense of purpose or well-defined rules of engagement. In our case, the participants had a list of short-term deliverables and a clear purpose, which is to develop a comparative analysis to be disseminated through a hybrid presentation. The emergence of organic leaders does not diminish the roles and responsibilities of the moderators, but enriches and enhances them. During the reflective evaluation, all the participants explained how they learned from each other's leadership, cultural backgrounds, and experiences.

Cross-cultural time management and work habits. It is not a secret that the meaning of time varies based on cultural contexts. In specific regions or countries of the world, some people have a very rigid understanding of time, and others see time as a flexible continuum. With respect to work habits, some individuals like to engage in long discussions that could turn into trying to win an argument as opposed to a compromise. Others prefer to consider the presented choices and vote on them. Intercultural group work inherently involves cross-cultural perspectives of time and work habits that could complicate intercultural interactions. In our group the facilitation helped negate the frustrating effect that differences in perspectives on time and work habits could have had. I could read

cues hinting to me that the frustration was ever present. In the end, the human dynamics worked out well. Some factors that contributed to that included but were not limited to tolerance for intercultural differences, cross-cultural adaptability, reasonable flexibility, and fair accountability.

Co-Moderator's Perspective

Building trust and reducing uncertainties. The use of familiarisation games during the online kick-off meeting proved to be an extremely effective way of getting participants to get to know each other. They played a crucial role in establishing an initial connection between the participants and creating a positive and open atmosphere. This helped lower the inhibition threshold for intercultural interaction. In the online phase, participants were required to develop and make a short PowerPoint presentation about themselves. This was designed to verify whether the technology requirements and readiness were met. Sharing the presentations independently using Zoom was also a fun way for the participants to familiarise themselves with the platform's features and feel confident in the digital environment. Overall, the introductory games proved to be an integral part of the successful launch of our hybrid comparative group. They helped create an inclusive and supportive learning environment where all participants felt welcome and comfortable.

Promoting personal initiative and intercultural cooperation in the group work phase. During the group work phase, the participants were given plenty of room for initiative and self-determination to create space for intercultural coordination processes. The moderators gradually withdrew, but were still present and approachable if questions arose. The participants had to contribute their expert knowledge on the digitalization policies and practices of their own home countries, which they had gathered during the online phase. In the beginning, it was challenging for them to work together to develop a conceptual framework to make meaningful comparisons between the countries. It was interesting in these moments to see how individual participants took the lead to support the participants with specific questions and drive the group work process forward. These individuals played a key role in the intercultural collaboration and contributed significantly to the success of the group work phase.

Sporadic support. There was a moment when the participants' self-directed group work came to a standstill, and it became clear to me that the group would like a little more guidance and support. At this moment, I first sought contact with the moderator to ensure that we came to a joint decision on how to approach the group. On the other hand, it was important to me that we, as the responsible parties, were pursuing the same goals and that there was agreement on how to proceed. After this discussion, we acted as learning process moderators by introducing tips for structuring the final presentation into the group work to give the participants a little more orientation. After this intervention, the dynamics of the group changed abruptly. There was more clarity, determination, and an intensive focus to complete the cross-national comparison. During this phase, the face-to-face and online participants coordinated independently and distributed the individual

subtasks in an extremely sensible and time-saving manner. During this time, the group decided to implement the final presentation using both analogue and digital tools so that the special hybrid character of the comparative group was reflected in the presentation. These moments revealed a well-coordinated team that recognised the strengths of the individuals and used them efficiently. A comparable moment of exchange between the moderators took place when it was necessary to agree on appropriate compensation for a student who had not attended all of the comparative group sessions. In this moment, too, the collegial coordination between the moderators ensured that a good proposal could be developed by mutual agreement, which was then jointly presented to the student.

Regular communication with participants, especially digital participants, using various digital media and tools. Regular communication with participants, especially digital participants, played a crucial role in the hybrid comparative group. Digital communication tools enabled quick and flexible accessibility for participants, allowing for the effective management of unforeseen technical challenges. Accordingly, multiple communication channels (including messaging services, email, and the video conference system's chat) were utilised to meet the needs and preferences of all participants. While the use of messaging services facilitated informal, quick interactions, extensive and formal information was conveyed to the participants via email (to ensure the respect of privacy standards). However, the challenge of using various communication tools created some avoidable confusion and overload due to excessive information.

Participants' Perspectives

Participant 1. I tried my best to be able to attend the AEA24 in person. However, due to some limitations, I had to stay back in Lisbon and attended the AEA24 online. I was not quite happy to attend the AEA24 online because I wanted to be physically there to enjoy the social interactions with other people from different parts of the world, listen to their stories, meet the moderators who were from different universities across continents. I had my own assumptions that one could only enjoy a learning process while being physically present (i.e., in person). However, the way the second week of AEA24 was planned and executed made me not regret my decision to attend online. After the individual presentations during the first two days of week two, we then worked in groups and prepared a cumulative presentation of data on the digitalization of adult education from different parts of the world. This exercise of collaborating with group members from different parts of the world was an intercultural learning process for me.

I was completely involved in the learning process, as well as through WhatsApp conversations. I was thoroughly enjoying myself. There were times when we only had group discussions with three of us who were online but most of the time the group work involved the participants who were physically present there and they joined us online while being in the physical classroom setup. This was an amazing experience for me. The final day was a combined presentation where we all worked together. The participants divided the tasks among themselves and worked together to prepare a masterpiece presentation on the

digitalization of adult education and learning from several countries. The presentation was well-synchronised, where all of us either online or in-person participated and had our parts to share with the larger audience. This for me was a true example of inclusiveness, tolerance, and intercultural learning. The moderators ensured that all opinions were regarded and counted. Later, the in-person participants followed suit to make sure their online peers were not feeling unheard. Also, effective communication was established via a WhatsApp group where we were constantly in touch if there were any unforeseen technical errors. At the same time, we were discussing other relevant stuff after the full day because we were all so immersed in the established learning process. For me, online/hybrid learning has always been more about self-learning, where an individual has to own his/her learning. However, this time it was more of a collaborative learning experience, where each individual was making sure to take the others with them, and so no one was left behind.

Participant 2. Upon arrival in Germany, it took me 24 hours to navigate and locate the accommodation to lodge in. During my journey in Germany, I learned to be punctual to catch up with the tram or bus when moving around. I learned about social policy models and different types of adult education providers in Germany. I also learned how the level of adult education programs depends largely on the social, political, and economic situations in different countries. I had a different understanding prior to these intercultural interactions.

The hybrid method adopted for the program was to a large extent successful. The moderator and co-moderator created a friendly learning environment that allowed each participant to express their view based on their cultural background. The participants were supported in remaining focused despite the cultural differences by being given up-to-date guidelines. Each participant was allowed to give information that reflected the participant's culture in their respective country on the practice of adult education. I realised how the operations of educational systems of other countries are connected to their culture and learning environments.

My participation in the AEA24 helped me realise that I can achieve any goal I set for myself with determination and tenacity. I learned that I can be myself regardless of people's opinion and idea in any situation. I don't need to do things the same way other people do them, as long as it does not affect others around me. I have reflected on the assumptions and expectations that I had when I decided to attend the program. I learned to prepare adequately for any activities and ask questions to have enough information to complete my work. I learned about the need to prepare ahead of time for any task and journey.

I did experience internet failure, which sometimes affected my active participation. For instance, the group could not complete the presentation on time. The presentation was restructured so the participants could handle it, which led to better performances. In the end, it turned out very well. The AEA24 helped me realise that intercultural interactions require one to be willing to learn from other people with different viewpoints and adapt to new environments.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that the moderators used prior intercultural experiences to account for the underlying cultural differences in the planning phase of the hybrid international work group on digitalization in adult education and learning. There were regular virtual planning meetings between the moderators to prepare for the comparative group. The moderators were intentional in the utilisation of cross-cultural awareness, cross-cultural sensitivity and validation (respect, appreciation, critique), and cross-cultural communication. They used various digital media and tools to facilitate intercultural communications among the face-to-face and online participants. Similarly, the participants used various formal and informal resources and support to ensure their preparation before attending the AEA24. The formal resources and support were the digital documentation shared by the moderators before the program started, as well the support readily available at their academic institutions. The informal support came primarily from friends and family members in their home country. They also benefited from friends living in Germany and fellow participants that they digitally met through the digital media platform offered by the moderators. Overall, the study found that interculturality-minded comparative group design sets the stage for initial open-minded intercultural interactions.

Bonk and Graham (2005) differentiated between (a) enabling blends, which focus on providing access and convenience for teaching and learning through digitally mediated interactions; (b) enhancing blends, which aim not only to enable access and convenience but also some incremental pedagogical changes; and (c) transforming blends, which use digital technologies to radically transform and “create knowledge through dynamic interactions” (p. 4) that would not be possible without technology. The AEA24 portrays the profile of a transforming blend design. The findings suggest a transforming blend that fostered authentic cross-cultural interactions, freedom for risk-taking, spontaneous creativity, and intercultural learning. It is not surprising that transforming blends yield radical pedagogical approaches or learning experiences. Falloon (2011) asserted that hybrid teaching offers a better balance for autonomous learning experiences. The findings show that the design of the hybrid teaching and learning format was relevant for promoting autonomous and intercultural learning processes. The journey to another country and the program support of the comparative group made a significant contribution as well.

Further, the moderators and participants shared how they interculturality navigated through the implementation of the hybrid international work group on digitalization in adult education and learning. The moderators emphasized the role of authentic trust between the co-moderators to ensure the clear understanding of guidelines and instructions, the enforcement of intentional synchronous in-person and online interactions, the empowerment of the participants to nurture democratic deliberation, the provision of strategic recalibration, the creation of an environment that facilitates the emergence of organic leadership, the development of reflexes to authentically catch intercultural cues, and the infusion of cross-cultural adaptability in executing the action plan. Other facets included showing spontaneity, humility, and flexibility, reflective practice, building trust

and reducing uncertainties, promoting personal initiatives and intercultural cooperation among the participants, offering sporadic support, and finally, maintaining regular communication with participants, especially digital participants, using various digital media and tools. The participants shared how both the moderators and fellow participants ensured that their voices were genuinely validated and made them feel included. The participants explained how the sense of belonging, the friendly but focused and cross-culturally tolerant environment contributed to helping them overcome some challenges they faced during the process, thus enhancing their determination to participate.

The findings also revealed that both the moderators and the participants experienced intercultural learning during the hybrid group work on digitalization in adult education and learning. The moderators and participants expressed how their existing knowledge was challenged, and consequently realised that their intercultural competence was incomplete. This is a form of cultural dissonance (Taylor & Hamdy, 2013). The participants experienced cultural dissonance based on the fact that the operation of adult education occurring in the countries of their peers was different to what the participants had expected. Intercultural dissonance is a key trigger for engaging in intercultural learning.

This study adds to the literature on intercultural competence through digital technologies. Jorgensen et al. (2022) conducted a study, which found that the hybrid space involving intercultural encounters has the potential to foster critical intercultural learning. However, they found that the intercultural learning “was limited by [...] the skills and attitudes of the lecturers, and asymmetries in project goals” (Jorgensen et al., 2022, p. 318). On the contrary, our study found that once the design of a hybrid module is intentionally intercultural-minded, the purpose is clear and shared by both moderators and learners, and implemented fairly and equitably in a respectful, accountable, and fun manner, according to plan, students can experience critical intercultural learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings inspired some recommendations for practice and future research. With respect to practice, the planning and implementation of a hybrid comparative group for a multicultural group should follow some key principles that account for intercultural competence constructs. The development of netiquette guidelines can be instrumental in the successful implementation of hybrid teaching and learning. Practitioners may further explore the implementation of a two-phase hybrid education program: online and hybrid. The first phase could follow the design and implementation of effective online teaching and learning (Hiltz & Goldman, 2004; Smith et al., 2021), while the second phase could offer a hybrid setting (Du & Simpson, 2002; Jean-Francois, 2012) that is intentional about autonomous and authentic intercultural interactions.

With respect to future research, scholars might explore how the international/intercultural profile of a comparative research group affects the dynamics of digitalization and working effectiveness. Furthermore, the influence of hybrid curriculum design and instruction

on intercultural competence can be explored from the perspectives of scholars who might look at trends in the literature, curriculum designers who may pay special attention to digital technology, instructors who might look at the phenomenon from a teaching perspective, and finally, learners who might consider their personal learning experiences.

LIMITATIONS AND REMEDIAL STRATEGIES

There has been some scepticism about the scientific value of autoethnography. For example, some argue that a self-exploration only by the researcher is not academic enough, and therefore considered as too self-serving (Karlsson et al., 2019), with potential for bias (Alvesson, 2003), and narcissism (Eriksson, 2010). In response, we used collaborative autoethnography, which involved concurrent autoethnographic writings by co-researchers (Chang et al., 2012). Further, we used the principles of qualitative research in the social sciences. Anderson (2006) explains that autoethnography can be analytic or evocative. Analytic autoethnography follows the postpositivist and constructivist approaches used in qualitative research. On the other hand, evocative autoethnography is inspired by critical theory and involves a narrative writing style. Consequently, we used a combination of both autoethnographic approaches. We adopted a conventional academic approach to conduct our study and report our findings. However, we prioritised a free-form style to describe our experiences and perspectives. Gergen and Gergen (2018) advised that with evocative autoethnography, researchers can evoke their emotions or their feelings. Additionally, to factor in the ethical considerations expected in conventional research, the researchers discussed the accuracy and factual representations of their narratives (Lapadat, 2017). Finally, despite the criticism, it is important to stress that in autoethnography, self-experience is considered a worthy and valuable social phenomenon that a researcher can analyse to develop deeper and more complex understanding (Schmid, 2019). Therefore, the limitations of autoethnography are remediable through the use of social science tools and standards.

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