Introduction to the special issue Intercultural communicative competence and mobility: Perspectives on virtual, physical, and critical dimensions

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Introduction

As we write the introduction to this Special Issue on mobility and immobility as it relates to intercultural communication education, we are rounding out the first year living with the COVID-19 pandemic. We (Beatrice and Chantelle) both sit in Tucson, Arizona, working remotely from our homes just several miles apart, using the same forms of telecollaboration and digitally mediated communication technologies we rely on to meet with colleagues in Columbia, France, Austria, and China. The irony of editing an Issue on mobility while effectively in a state of lockdown is not lost on us; only weeks before we began to draft the call for papers, we had been organizing the international conference that inspired it, the 7th International Conference on the Development and Assessment of Intercultural Competence hosted by the Center for Educational Resources for Culture, Language, and Literacy (CERCLL),[1] with 303 participants from 18 countries in attendance (including a few of the authors in this Issue). Although we could not have possibly predicted how the events of 2020 would unfold, both the more virtual forms of that now enable our ability to stay safely put at home and more metaphorical extensions of movement found in media discourses on language learning as virtual travel were very much a part of the original conceptualization at that time.[2] The motivation behind this Special Issue was born out of a sense that the relationship between mobility and intercultural communication education was due for some critical attention. Even as the social phenomena collectively shorthanded as globalization have enabled participation in dispersed communities and markets, they have also laid bare in many ways the inequities that persist (see Dasli & Diaz, 2016; Sorrells, 2016; Stein, 2019); and yet, the educational and economic benefits of physical and virtual exchanges and time spent abroad are almost uniformly lauded. The pandemic has thus highlighted an already existing need for frameworks and methodologies that recognize the

socioeconomic, political, identitarian, and ideological divides that shape the dynamic landscapes of intercultural communication and the opportunities disparate individuals have to move through and take up space within them.

The first two contributions in the Issue, by José Aldemar Álvarez Valencia and Manuela Wagner and from Maria Grazia Imperiale, foreground potential obstacles to intercultural mobility that existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic: closed borders and restricted travel. Both of these studies take up issues of access and equity, while critically engaging with the blindspots that underlie assumptions that mobility and interculturality are coterminous. Álvarez and Wagner's article, *Roadblocks to intercultural mobility: indigenous students' journeys in Colombian universities*, considers the experiences of indigenous students studying at Colombian universities. The postcolonial context problematizes dominant contemporary notions of education mobility as movement away from a home country to a host country; the "journey" undertaken by the students in this study is instead through educational systems built upon their ancestral homelands and the "roadblocks" are systemic, institutional, and imposed through colonial ways of knowing. Álvarez and Wagner's study thus compels us to reflect on how we might expand and rethink intercultural communication to include the acts of "symbolic re-territorialization and re-existence" undertaken by these students as they navigate educational institutions that exclude them by design. In Imperiale's article, *Intercultural education in times of restricted travel: lessons from the Gaza Strip*, immobility is imposed by blockade. The focal participants in the study are English as a second language teachers in Gaza. Imperiale herself also serves in the role of a participant observer from afar; she led the professional learning workshops and collected the resulting data while based in the UK, due to the bidirectional travel restrictions enforced by Israel. The teachers in Imperiale's study are intensely aware of intercultural experiences they have been unable to have and share their concerns about their ability to foster in their students' competencies that they do not feel that they themselves have been able to develop. At the same time, through their reflections, discussions, and the pedagogical activities they design, these educators demonstrate the kind of *savoir s'engager* Michael Byram has associated with the development of intercultural communicative competence, albeit in ways that do not fit neatly in standard rubrics for intercultural competence. Imperiale compellingly argues for a capabilities approach including greater attention to agency and aspiration in intercultural education, which would in turn afford teachers and researchers the start of a metalanguage for understanding what intercultural learning can look like even when contact is restricted.

Articles from Wenhao Diao and Yi Wang and from Irwin Compiegne take up a form of mobility that has often been discussed in the scholarship on intercultural communication education, namely study abroad, while also providing new insights into what takes place in intercultural communication during these stays. Diao and Wang's study, *Multiracial Chinese American women studying abroad in China: the intersectionality of gender, race and language learning*, is an important reminder of the diversity of study abroad experiences. The article focuses on three students, all multiracial Chinese American women. Drawing from interview data and audio recordings of the students' interactions with their Chinese roommates and host families, Diao and Wang highlight participants' ways of making sense of their gendered, ethnoracial identities as they move through cultural encounters and suggest that these maneuvers demonstrate forms of knowledge and competencies that are underrepresented in discussions of intercultural communication. In his article, *At the crossroads: rethinking study abroad students' social networking and intercultural communication in the age of globalization*, Irwin Compiegne examines the role that social networks play in helping study abroad students adjust and socialize in the host country. Social media posts and interview data collected from seven Australian students revealed not only the presence of an online co-national network, but also the buffer role that the multi-national network of proficient or native speakers of the target language played between L2 learners and hosts. The data also shed light on the range of intercultural

interactions that take place in the study abroad context. With this study, Compiègne shows the positive impact that co-national and multi-national networks (online or otherwise) can have on study abroad students but also that developing friendships and engaging in intercultural interactions with host nationals is not as straightforward as usually imagined. This calls into question the common practice of curbing student contacts with co-national and multi-national networks, given that these can be essential for study abroad students' ability to socialize and have new experiences in the host country.

The next pair of articles shift the focus squarely to teacher perspectives. In *Shaping the teaching and learning of intercultural communication through virtual mobility*, Theresa Catalano and Andrea Muñoz-Barriga show how virtual mobility facilitated the intercultural learning of pre-service and in-service teachers in the U.S. and Columbia, thus serving as a model for their own practice. They also critically reflect on missed opportunities for learning; for example, their data shows how linguistic hierarchies and monolingual ideologies can remain unchallenged, even as participants engaged in encounters that complicated them. Because the WhatsApp pen pal exchange they report on took place in the semester that straddled the weeks before and at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, their study also provides a glimpse at acts of intercultural communication between teachers during a public health crisis that crossed national and cultural borders. The sense of undergoing a shared crisis in real time, gave the participants a fairly unique opportunity to share advice and emotions, as well as highly personalized insights into the ways in which local cultural practices add particularity to even seemingly universal experiences. Writing from the context of Arabic teaching, Yousra Abourehab and Mahmoud Azaz's point of departure is a language which itself is defined by its diachronic and geographical mobility. In their article, *Should standard Arabic have "the lion's share"?: Teacher ideologies in L2 Arabic through the lens of pedagogical translanguaging* they question how teaching a language as clearly multidialectal and multiglossic as Arabic might connect with the idea of *translanguaging* in language teaching and learning. Through their analysis of dialogues between themselves and university-level Arabic instructors, Abourehab and Azaz show that the teachers resist certain practices that might be associated with translanguaging pedagogies they also demonstrate an openness, in particular when confronted with concrete examples of translingual elements of communication. This leads the authors to argue for what they describe as a *judicious* approach to translanguaging as a way of shifting teachers' ideologies and ultimately their teaching practices.

Finally, the last article echoes the caveats and concerns voiced in the other contributions to the volume, problematizing mobility as a core concept in internationalization strategies within higher education. In *Reframing and hospicing mobility in higher education: challenges and possibilities*, Adrianna Diaz, Marisa Cordella, Samantha Disbray, Barbara Hanna, and Anna Mikhaylova point to the body of research that reports on the significant limitations of physical international student mobility for intercultural learning, the inequities it reproduces, and the unsustainable practices it promotes, and they argue that the time has come for higher education to reckon with these under-acknowledged concerns. They push those in higher education to reconsider the overreliance on mobility as a means of engaging students with difference and fostering global mindedness. To this end, the authors critically explore reframing and hospicing as possible avenues to reconceptualize current understandings of internationalization and the role that mobility should or should not play in it going forward.

The distribution of COVID-19 vaccines beginning in many countries is currently bringing hope that our daily lives and work might soon return to "normal" and become more mobile once again. Institutions are already reactivating international mobility programs it had put on hold with the aim to resume activities this summer, and conference organizers (including us) are debating when we will be able to meet to discuss ideas and share research related to intercultural education in-person. This

Special Issue as a whole is intended as an intervention and a reminder to use these "abnormal" times as an opportunity to reflect, to grapple with the inequities and unsustainable practices that characterize many existing international mobility processes (cf, Diaz *et al.*, 2021), and to use this to pave the way for new normals within intercultural communication education.

Author biodata

Beatrice Dupuy is a Professor in the Department of French and Italian, Department of Public and Applied Humanities, the Interdisciplinary PhD program in Second Language Acquisition and Teaching, and is co-Director of the Center for Educational Resources in Culture, Language, and Literacy at the University of Arizona. Her research primarily focuses on literacy-based approaches to teaching and learning, language teacher professional development, and on experiential learning as a theoretical and practical framework for language education in home and study-abroad contexts. Her most recent publications are two co-edited volumes, *Pathways to Paradigm Change: A Critical Examination of Prevailing Discourses and Ideologies in Foreign Language Education* (with Kristen Michelson, 2019) and *Language Learning and Professionalization in Higher Education: Pathways to Preparing Learners and Teachers in/for the 21st Century* (with Muriel Grosbois, 2020).

Chantelle Warner is Associate Professor of German and Second Language Acquisition and Teaching at the University of Arizona, where she also co-directs the Center for Educational Resources in

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[2] For an example of this discourse of language learning as it emerged during the COVID pandemic, see Stephanie Rosenbloom's "Want to Learn French? Italian? Russian? There's No Time Like the Present" from the New York Times on April 28, 2020.