

Original Research

Challenging intercultural discomforts: Intercultural communicative competence through digital storytelling

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Discomfort perceived by speakers in intercultural situations becomes one of the main psychological factors which makes speakers give up attempts at communication and may result in frustration or inefficient communication. The article discusses the pedagogical potential of digital storytelling, understood as multimodal pedagogy that encourages creative expression and self-representation, as a tool for challenging and mitigating perceived communicational and intercultural discomfort within the context of intercultural competence development and training. The authors argue that collaborative digital storytelling in multicultural teams raises intercultural awareness by creating a safe, structured, and facilitated (virtual) space for students to develop their ability to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language and represents a viable tool of challenging and overcoming intercultural discomfort by providing an opportunity for repeated intercultural interaction through negotiation of meaning and intersubjective construction of knowledge as well as by providing motivating real-life context for students' work. In supporting dialogic and constructivist approaches to educational practice, digital storytelling is fully equipped to provide a viable alternative to direct instruction and transmissive models of teaching. In addition to this, by providing a digital element, digital storytelling allows students to reflect on the culturally as well as technologically mediated nature of communication.

KEYWORDS: social constructivism, dialogue, digital storytelling, communication, interpretation, hands-on approach



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1. INTRODUCTION

Dealing with intercultural discomforts defined as interactions 'in which the individual experiences an inconsistency between the observed behaviour of a particular, culturally different individual and the stereotype held of the latter's cultural group' (Bernstein & Salipante, 2017, p. 3), such as language barriers, inefficient communication system and different norms of familiar and accepted, are widely seen as desirable in the

development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Yet, the pedagogical approaches leading to transformative rather than transmissive education practices fostering motivation and deep learning in ICC development and training are not always fully understood. In this study, we present digital storytelling as an effective and motivating pedagogical tool in higher education intercultural communicative competence courses focusing primarily on socially constructivist, inclusive

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and meaning-based rather than fact-based knowledge and skills. As part of the discussion, we pay attention to shifts in ICC pedagogies as well as some of the recently introduced descriptors of cross-cultural value varieties. Finally, we describe a pedagogical practice of implementing digital storytelling as an effective collaborative and co-creative method multiplying the intercultural learning outcomes. Our main argument is that digital storytelling has a strong pedagogical potential to combat intercultural discomfort by providing students with a safe space to experience communication as an activity mediated by culture and technology, while allowing them to reflect on how ‘discomfort, repeated interaction, motivation, and ability’ (Bernstein & Salipante, 2017, p. 3) shape their intercultural encounters.

2. CONCEPTUALISING ICC

As literature and the internet sources show, the notions *intercultural*, *cross-cultural*, *multicultural*, *intercultural competence* and *interculturality* are used in varied and perhaps inaccurate and sometimes even confusing ways. With reference to Byram’s (1997) work and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), effective intercultural communicators have the ability to perform appropriately in various contexts (Byram 1997, p. 71), complementing the competences and skills defined as intercultural communicative competence. Intercultural communicative competence further recognises the influence of the speaker’s own culture and the way they view themselves and others, knowing how to relate and interpret meaning, developing critical awareness, knowing how to discover cultural information and knowing how to relativise the values, attitudes, and beliefs of others (Bilá et al., 2020). Deardorff (2006), for instance, speaks more broadly about intercultural competence (IC) and describes it as ‘possessing the necessary attitudes and reflective and

behavioural skills and using these to behave effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations’ (Deardorff, 2006, p. 242). Rather than providing a systematic synchronic analysis of existing definitions of and approaches to ICC which were provided elsewhere (see Holmes et al., 2016), and summarising existing criticism of ICC (see Hřebačková & Štefl, 2021) the following section focuses on selected variations of approaches that interconnect theory and pedagogical practices.

3. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION MODELS

The aim of this section is to provide a brief outline of the most prominent theoretical as well as educational approaches to ICC. In scientific discourse as well as in education including language learning a number of different descriptive (Hall, 1966; Hofstede, 1980) and performance-oriented (Byram, 1997) models serve mostly as predefined archetypes that enable us to predict a culture’s behaviour, clarify and explain away behavioural preferences and patterns, search for varying degrees of unity, standardise policies, and perceive neatness and order (Lewis, 2002, p. 29). Providing a basis for the treatment of intercultural communication, a brief overview of cultural dimensions used in some of those culture models are provided in Table 1.

Concerning the methods applied for describing cultures, Table 1 overviews the cultural dimensions most often taught in higher education including the predominantly essentialist views of culture which offer training models for business purposes such as those of frequently cited scholars such as Hall (1966), Hofstede (1980), Byram (1997) and Trompenaars (1996). The non-essentialists (Kramsch & Steffensen, 2008; Liddicoat & Scariño, 2013), on the other hand, assume that language users in interaction are in the process of becoming, making, and interpreting meaning (Kecskes, 2013). In addition, the table includes latest results of the less-spread academic World Values Survey (WVS, 2022a) as they also significantly shape the ICC approach by shifting the focus of both students and professionals from the boundaries of national groups that are presumed to be mostly homogenous to fluid dynamic culture zones mirroring pervasive cultural values in cross-national and over-time perspective towards an analysis of the trends of intercultural changes in post-industrial societies. Extending its massive empirical research between 2017-2021, the World Values Study elaborated such new factors as justice, moral principles, corruption, accountability and risk, migration, national security and global governance, organising them within two major

Table 1
Cultural models and dimensions overview

DESCRIPTIVE (Hall, 1966)	EMPIRICAL (Hofstede, 1980)	EMPIRICAL (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997)	INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE (Lewis, 1999)	CULTURE COMPONENTS (Liddicoat, 2009)	DEVELOPMENT STUDY 1981-2021 (WVS, 2022a)
high vs low context		universalism vs particularism	knowledge	action	traditional vs secular- rational
	individualism vs collectivism	individualism vs communitarianism	attitudes	understanding	contrasts societies based on religion, authority, fatherland, family
	power distance	neutral vs emotional	interpretation skills	engagement	survival vs self- expression
	masculinity vs femininity	specific vs diffuse	interaction skills		contrasts societies based on gender roles, experience of poverty, education, health and security, civic activism
monochronic vs polychronic	short-term vs long-term orientation	sequentially vs synchronically organised actions	critical cultural thought		
	uncertainty avoidance	controlling nature vs letting it take its course			
space (proxemics)	indulgence vs restraint	achievement vs ascription			

dimensions: traditional vs secular-rational and survival vs self-expression (Table 1). Visualising the trends of the world’s intercultural evolution in Inglehart–Welzel Cultural maps (WVS, 2022b), the WVS shows the movement as well as the persistence of distinctive cultural traditions in different culture zones, which gives rise to newly shaping cross-cultural variation (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).

Many controversies with the earlier models of teaching ICC lie in the limited perspectives taken on cultures, which led to a narrow view with limited usefulness for ongoing development of intercultural competence or for communication (see Ferri 2014; Matsuo 2012, 2015; McSweeney, 2002, 2009). Facing this reality, we believe that the higher education ICC pedagogies need to mirror such variations to open space for changes, different perspectives and choices and thus create conditions that have the potential to transform the learner on various levels (e.g., cognitive, intercultural, creative). Moreover, inviting students to become

knowledgeable active authors and participants in a media production culture fosters critical thinking (Anderson & Chua, 2010), while simultaneously fostering the development of collaborative and digital competences and networking with international peers, reflecting the learning process and dialogical relationships help them to discover their full potential as learners.

4. THE STORY OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING

The aim of this section is to provide a brief account of digital storytelling and its pedagogic potential in relation to the development and training ICC, in particular to the phenomena of discomfort, repeated interaction, motivation, and ability which play a crucial role in mitigating discomfort created by cross-cultural interactions (Bernstein & Salipante, 2017, p. 3).

Digital storytelling represents a broad set of practices which utilise technologically mediated processes of creating stories for a given purpose. The term was coined and popularised by Joe Lambert, founder of the

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Centre for Digital Storytelling (now StoryCenter, established in 1994), who in his seminal book *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community* defined digital storytelling as the ‘gathering of personal stories into short little nuggets of media called Digital Stories, through a methodology called Digital Storytelling’ (Lambert, 2013, p. 1). Building on a well-established assumption that ‘stories are what we do as humans to make sense of the world’ (Lambert, 2013, p. 6), he introduced an original digital storytelling methodology comprising seven key components of a digital storytelling design. Following this method, digital stories created at the Centre for Digital Storytelling are by definition: (a) self-revelatory, (b) personal or first person voice, (c) focus on a ‘lived experience’, feature (d) ‘photos more than a moving image’ as well as (e) a soundtrack, offer a specific (f) length and design, i.e., a video of two to three minutes with minimum editing and ‘raw form’ achievable for the beginning storytellers, and finally, (g) a specific intention which privileges ‘self-expression and self-awareness over concerns of publication and audience, process over product’ (Lambert, 2013, p. 37-38).

Over time digital storytelling established itself across academic disciplines and areas of knowledge including marketing, tourism, history and heritage preservation (Burgess et al., 2010), community curating (Copeland & De Moor, 2018), or intercultural education and training (Stewart & Gachago, 2016). And as Lambert’s (2013) digital storytelling method pays close attention to providing a sense of ‘agency in life and social interactions’ (Lambert, 2013, p. 134) – including education –, the process of creating and co-creating (digital) stories soon found its way into university curricula as a potent pedagogic tool and training method. This is especially true in ‘integrated constructivist learn-

ing settings’ (Lambert, 2013, p. 134), where digital storytelling soon became a preferred alternative to direct, transmissive instruction in a culturally and linguistically homogeneous class (Kadilina & Ryadchikova, 2018).

Relying on the principles of social constructivism (Akpan et al., 2020), in their approach, both digital storytelling and constructivism fundamentally differ from pedagogical models which rely on a direct transmission of knowledge from an expert to non-expert audiences including students, pupils, trainees, etc. In its emphasis on active participation and sense of agency, Lambert’s (2013) pedagogical philosophy shares a number of key features with the general principles of constructivist pedagogies which, quite similarly to digital storytelling, rely on the process of ‘individuals creating their own new understandings on the basis of an interaction between what they already know and believe and ideas and knowledge with which they come into contact’ (Richardson, 2003, p. 1623-1624). As Lambert (2013) himself puts it, ‘young people, despite feeling adept at multimedia tools, long for environments where freedom of expression is possible – where they can choose what story to tell and decide how it should be told. After-school environments are often where effective youth-based projects can best be developed. These efforts give youth a sense of real world consequence that is a critical component of a constructive educational philosophy’ (Lambert, 2013, p. 132).

In this sense, digital storytelling seems fully compatible with ‘a constructivist learning environment based on novel principles of teaching and learning [that] has the potential to enhance student engagement and provide better educational outcomes for learners’ (Barber, 2016, p. 10). Accentuating repeated engagement and interaction, digital storytelling opens up space for motivating ‘student-centred, collaborative approaches to learning where knowledge and understanding are constructed through interaction and negotiation’ (O’Dowd, 2016, p. 292) rather than on abstracted ‘expert’ knowledge; in the area of ICC, such knowledge is typically represented by various cultural dimensions or models (Khukhlaev et al., 2020) as discussed above.

From the point of view of developing intercultural communicative competence, digital storytelling, understood as a ‘multimodal pedagogy that encourages creative expression and self-representation’ (Stewart & Gachago, 2016, p. 529), is consistently described as a viable tool for increasing student engagement, co-creativity, or creativity in general (Schmoelz, 2018, p. 11)

'In this sense, collaborative digital storytelling, understood both as a process and method, benefits the students in raising their awareness of three key areas, thereby meeting the set pedagogic goals, i.e., by raising their intercultural awareness, technological awareness, and their reflective self-awareness as learners and intercultural speakers'

and thereby motivation to overcome obstacles in cross-cultural interaction, including culture-related discomfort. This is particularly relevant in multicultural classrooms and teams or online intercultural exchanges (OIEs) online intercultural exchanges which *'develop their foreign language skills and intercultural competence through collaborative tasks and project work'* (O'Dowd, 2013, p. 1) and represent a generally recognised tool for developing ICC (O'Dowd & Waire, 2009; O'Dowd, 2013). In both, cases digital storytelling promises to overcome or at least mitigate perceived student intercultural discomfort associated with the development of ICC by offering a safe and consistent cooperative space for a *'negotiation of meaning'* (O'Dowd & Waire, 2009, p. 174-175) between different linguistic and cultural communities.

This is achieved by the fact that, firstly, *'the medium of story [allows] students to feel empathy for their global partners'* (Stewart & Gachago, 2016, p. 535); secondly, by the emphasis digital storytelling puts on the process rather than a product (Lambert, 2013, p. 37-38), and, finally, by accentuating the constructive and socially embedded nature of (team)work and meaning making. Of considerable importance is also the fact that students working in multicultural teams may rely on the guided process of creating stories, which empowers and provides necessary scaffolding to students of different language and ability levels. In this sense, OIE tasks based on digital storytelling provide a safe-yet-facilitated platform, in which students can work on their projects both synchronously and asynchronously, both outside and inside their classroom, both independently with their team and under the guidance of the teacher whose role is to facilitate the process and allow skills and knowledge to be generated through the process, making *'the storytellers understand that they are making the story with support, not completely do-it-yourself'* (Lambert, 2013, p. 42).

In other words, when working on a digital artefact or story in a multicultural team, students are less likely to reject other cultures thanks experiencing discomfort and repeated interaction (Bernstein & Salipante, 2017, p. 3). At the same time, as these frustrations are experienced under the guidance of the teacher and as part of a structured process of creating a digital story (see below), the discomfort, if carefully reflected, should *'lead to learning and respect rather than tension and retreat into one's own culture'* (Bernstein & Salipante, 2017, p. 3).

In line with these assumptions, collaborative digital storytelling, now defined as an activity which combines cooperation of students from different cultures and backgrounds and a structured, multimodal co-creation process in an online environment, promises to become a linchpin in creating online higher education pedagogies which systematically foster student ability and motivation, co-creation, and multimodal practices, whose *'perceived benefits included engaging and motivating content learning, retaining and deepening knowledge, fostering mutual learning in online community, enhancing digital learning, and fostering motivation to implement multimodal pedagogy'* (Li, 2020, p. 1).

Further, recognising the need to *'support language learners in thinking about their learning [... and in] using their own skills, abilities, and competences to reach a specific learning objective'* (Kleppin & Spänkuch, 2012, p. 42) through supporting collaborative learning and co-creation, as well as the application of multimodal pedagogies, digital storytelling proves an ideal tool for supporting learner autonomy and motivation by its essentially democratic and inclusive character (Lambert, 2013, p. 2), further empowering students to overcome incidental intercultural misunderstandings occurring during the co-creation process. In this sense, collaborative digital storytelling, understood both as a process and method, benefits the students in raising their awareness of three key areas, thereby meeting the set pedagogic goals, i.e., by raising their intercultural awareness, technological awareness, and their reflective self-awareness as learners and intercultural speakers.

Importantly, in such inclusive environments, the development of ICC in students takes place dialogically, through co-creatively working on the given real-life project, rather than monologically, i.e., through a lecture on intercultural skills delivered transmissively by the teacher. This allows students to consider other perceptions and interpretations and raise the awareness of

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diversity through encouraging self-reflection and the creation of more globally conscious learners, and through empowering the personalised content and interactive learning and increasing motivation.

Collaborative digital storytelling in multicultural teams thus allows knowledge and skills to be constructed dialogically and repeatedly, in-between the students, once again, reducing their reliance on the teacher telling them what to do, and moving towards autonomy which relies on the dialogic nature of language and learning (Little, 2016, p. 51), decentralising learning experience and bringing it out of the class- and lecture rooms. This is crucial considering the current criticism of monologic ICC pedagogies based on essentialist knowledge models such as Byram’s or Hofstede’s (Matsuo, 2012; Ferri, 2014; Hoff, 2014; McSweeney, 2002, 2009; Mustajoki, 2021; Novikova et al., 2017).

Second, given that technologies are not culturally neutral objects (Kern, 2006, p. 189-191) and since technology and the ‘constellation of genres’ (Kern, 2006, p. 193) it brings – including computer-mediated communication – tends to be ‘biased toward information exchange’ (Kern, 2006, p. 193), i.e. towards monologism, both students and educators ‘need to be critically aware of the connections among technology, culture, and ideology, and specifically about the ways in which technology amplifies and constrains aspects of [not only] language learning’ (Kern, 2006, p. 201) but also of technologically mediated communication in general. Through its emphasis on the digital and hence technological aspect of the storytelling process, digital storytelling has the potential to raise awareness of technology as a medium influencing communication and of the specific qualities of online or electronic discourse which ‘takes on additional layers of mediation often without our conscious awareness’ (Kern, 2014, p. 341). This is pertinent not only in OIEs in which technology

plays a crucial role not only in the instrumental sense, i.e., in the faculty of students and teachers to correctly use it (O’Dowd, 2015a; 2015b), but also by raising students’ awareness of the effects technologies have on communication, cognition, and creation of meaning in general. Because digital storytelling draws attention to ‘learning a technique or technology and following the process forward to a completed product’ (Lambert, 2013, p. 42), it allows students to critically reflect on the process and the way it affects themselves both as learners and intercultural speakers.

Finally, collaborative digital storytelling raises autonomous and processual awareness, and self-reflection, encouraging metacognition and taking agency, encouraging metacognitive approaches, and thereby increasing students’ abilities to transfer or adapt their learning to new contexts and tasks by gaining a level of awareness above the subject matter. These skills are directly linked to developing students’ motivation and ability, further mitigating cross-cultural discomforts when working in multicultural teams. In line with this, teachers should encourage students to become ‘perpetual storytellers’ (Lambert, 2013, p. 6) by actively searching for elements and/or methods of (digital) storytelling they would have come across in their other subject, extracurricular subjects and both professional and private lives. This would not only reinforce students’ understanding of digital storytelling and related skills as transversal or transferable skills, i.e., ‘skills that are typically considered as not specifically related to a particular job, task, academic discipline or area of knowledge and that can be used in a wide variety of situations and work settings’ (UNESCO, 2022) and are in high demand by employers, but also develop their learning and metacognitive skills, encouraging them to transfer knowledge and skills from one area of knowledge to another (Vishnyakova & Vishnyakova, 2022).

Examples of such activities might include watching and use of TED talks, public speaking activities and/or networking clubs such as Toastmasters; higher education subjects or areas of knowledge which typically feature elements or practices may include but are not limited to copywriting, marketing, critical thinking, journalism or history. This opens up much needed space for interdisciplinary approaches (Novospasskaya & Zou, 2021). Understood as a transferable skill, digital storytelling and the methods it uses can also find numerous applications in professional or business settings affecting job positions in industries such as engineering, chemical processing and other. To demonstrate further

the interdisciplinarity, creativity and collaborative ideation of digital storytelling that starts in students' teamwork, digital stories such as *Why commercial campaigns may fail in different cultures* (Marketing), *Living with hlobal and local Identities* (Consumer behaviour), *Beer cultures within EU* (Biochemical technology) indicate the intercultural awareness as a good stead for global employability.

Measured through student perspectives, the digital storytelling in intercultural communicative competence courses makes learning motivating and enjoyable and reveals a number of related abilities and skills running from interpersonal to organisational, allowing for an authentic and motivating, student centred approach. Incidentally, bringing in-class the insight on the potential pitfalls of cross-cultural communication, e.g., by exploring online marketing blunders that proved counter-productive due to the language, history ignorance, different beliefs, communication styles serves as a reminder of the importance of good sense of humour that makes learning memorable.

5. DIGITAL STORYTELLING: PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

The following pedagogical observations play a crucial role in adjusting the digital storytelling process to become a key tool in overcoming intercultural discomfort. To fully utilise the potential of digital storytelling in higher education settings, in particular in OIEs, it seems imperative to favour what O'Dowd and Waire (2009, p. 173-178) refer to as 'collaborative tasks' rather than simple information exchange tasks, as such exchanges offer a safe space for students from different cultural backgrounds to safely co-create within the context of different linguistic and cultural communities. However, such information exchanges may prove successful as 'openers' in the initial stages of the collaboration and co-creation process, e.g., the cultural profiles of multicultural working teams are presented asynchronously in a shared collaborative web platform.

When exposed to the collaborative storytelling process, students are generally aware of storytelling and some of its advantages, and so it is easy for the teacher to build on their existing understanding. Nevertheless, most learners are not aware of the neurological factors involved with the act of telling or listening to a story, nor have they given much thought to how stories are used to create meaning. Therefore, it is important for learners to become aware of how brain activation works and how stories can be structured for maximum

emotional impact. Some basic elements of storytelling impact techniques which are inevitable for crafting stories through DST include the story arch (dramatic question or hook – rising action – crux or climax – falling action – conclusion or resolution) human scale that is memorable and tailoring (language) to listeners.

In line with these observations, digital storytelling with its original 7-step method by Lambert (2013) can be modified for specific situations and, more importantly, adapted to replicate professional digital storytelling practices. This plays a crucial role in providing an objective framework or 'work plan' in multicultural teams, further mitigating the risks of experiencing discomfort in cross-cultural interactions. Previously we considered how the DST facets may vary from the perspective of task categories, below they are analysed from the perspective of a scaffolded co-creation process.

In case of work in multicultural teams in particular, the scaffolded digital storytelling process as demonstrated in Figure 1 enables students to transform their insights and perspectives into a tangible final product, a final digital story, using a rich toolkit of applied managerial methods and techniques for each step; these include an empathy map for audience insights, simple and easy-to-use post-it-voting, grids for ideation to empower collaborative creativity and brainstorming such as the four categories method (realisable and non-realisable, realisable/non-realisable now and realisable/non-realisable later), a six-hat technique or now-wow-how matrix where horizontally, ideas are scaled according to the implementation (from easy to impossible) while vertically according to their originality (from normal to extraordinary) for decision making.

When conducted as a structured activity that optimises the challenge of fuzzy ideas and vague outcome, especially in culturally or otherwise heterogeneous teams, adhering to a predefined digital storytelling process proves more effective and less time consuming while remaining simple enough for both teachers and students to correctly implement and apply. The digital storytelling steps build upon each other, but they can also be used separately, skipped, or flexibly combined. Although each task has its specific features and emphasises different aspects, they all have a time frame for completion with clear deadlines and share a fixed structure of end-of-task summaries or reports, instructions as well as worksheets.

The flow of the tasks as such starts with an in-class introduction of tasks, creating teams, introducing team members' cultural profiles and agreeing on action

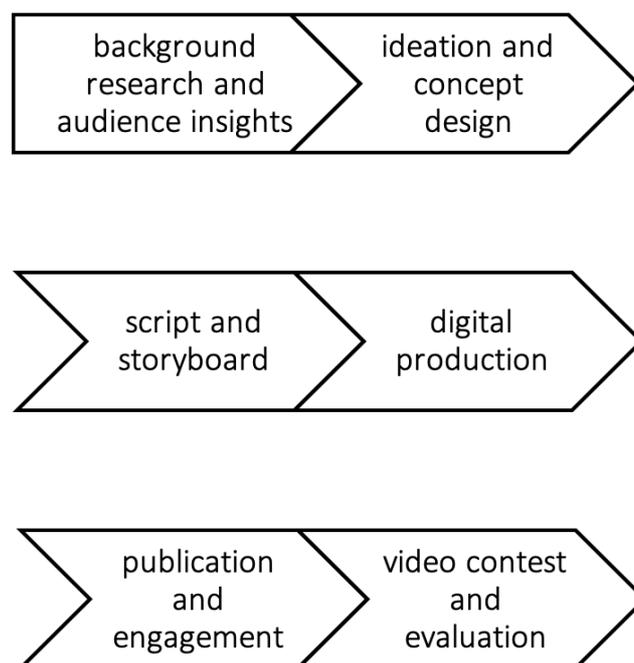


Figure 1. The digital storytelling process

steps, then moves to the semi-autonomous out-of-class work on practical issues scripts and storyboards, and is completed with presenting the digital stories in a students' contest followed by reviewing, feedback, and lessons learnt.

Our observations confirm that the practice-induced development of intercultural skills show the greatest effects at the initial stages, then gradually decrease and finally steeply rise with completing the action and competing with the team's final digital storytelling output. This regularity of the learning curve reflects a fundamental learning mechanism referred to as the 'power law of practice' or 'power law of learning' (Dörnyei, 2019) and the notably most effective method multiplying the higher education learning outcomes is well deployed attention and development of mental task approximation through a combination of verbal and written instruction and explanation as well as modelling the acquired skills through examples or analogy (Carlson, 2003; DeKeyser, 2007).

Applying a thoughtful power-sharing in the assessment process can engender a deeper level of students' commitment in the evaluative part of learning, especially if they take part in co-creating the criteria rubric and, depending on the teacher comfort level, the process of evaluation, e.g., assessing the digital storytelling creation and outputs with peers.

6. CONCLUSION

Collaborative digital storytelling in multicultural teams raises intercultural awareness by creating a safe, structured, and facilitated (virtual) space for students to train and develop their intercultural communicative competences. Further, digital storytelling is a viable tool of challenging and overcoming intercultural discomfort by providing an opportunity for repeated intercultural interaction through negotiation of meaning and intersubjective construction of knowledge as well as by providing motivating real-life context for students' work. In addition to this, by providing a digital element, digital storytelling allows students to reflect on the culturally as well as technologically mediated nature of communication. Finally, by accentuating dialogue and student-centred approaches, digital storytelling provides a viable framework within which students might apply, reflect on and critically assess dominant ICC models which remain prevalent in transmissive models of ICC development and training. Combining instructional and procedural techniques and modern technologies, which are part of learners' everyday lives, with learner autonomy proves helpful in all the involved problem-, project- and inquiry-based activities. Through digital storytelling students develop not only a deeper level of engagement with their subject matter, but also a stronger sense of ownership of their academic work.

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