Supporting the Development of Professional Identity through Intercultural Communication and Language Courses

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The aim of our study is to give examples on how the development of students' professional and cultural identity is supported through intercultural communication and foreign language courses at North Karelia University of Applied Sciences. This paper focuses in the degree programmes in nursing and rural industries. In our opinion, studies in intercultural communication and foreign languages can support identity formation processes e.g. by increasing the students' self-awareness as well as awareness of their role as future professionals in nursing and rural industries. This in turn can help them to use their previous knowledge and experiences, background, learning styles and strategies, personal goals and values as well as their cultural knowledge in order to develop their professional identity already during the studies.

At the beginning of this paper we present a theoretical overview on the issue of identity. We discuss the concepts of individual and collective identities as well as their relation to social and cultural identities. The paper progresses from the concept of identity with its different layers to the notion of professional identity. In addition, the paper studies different methods of supporting the development of professional identity. Finally, we present practical examples on how the development of students' personal and professional identity can be supported in the course of their studies.

1. Concept of identity and its layers

Identity can be defined by using the approaches of various sciences. The approach used in this study comes mostly from the social sciences, with some influences from the psychology. The concept of identity in itself refers to self-image or self-concept. Identity is not a stable or permanent perception of one’s self-image but changes in time and place and is constructed in social interaction in everyday life. (Petkova, 2005,11–12; Moore, 2006, 150).

Identity can also be studied as a group-image or a group-concept. Diana Petkova (2005) refers to individual (personal) and collective (group) identities as main concepts, whereas social and cultural identities are regarded as sub-concepts. According to Petkova (2005) identity can be divided into two main groups: individual (personal) identity and collective (group) identity. Both of these categories can further be divided into two sub-categories: social and cultural identities. The relationship between these concepts is illustrated in figure 1.
The division between individual and collective identities is firmly rooted in the social sciences. Despite the division, these concepts are closely interrelated because the individual sense of ‘self’ is formed not only on the basis of who the individuals are and think they are, but also on the basis of their belonging to social groups or collectives. The individual sense of ‘self’ is socially and culturally embedded. The basic dimensions, ‘self’ and ‘the other’, are always present in defining and developing ‘self’ by mirroring it with the ‘other’. (Petkova, 2005, 11–12; Social Identities, 2006.)

Distinguishing between social and cultural identities is not always easy. Social identities are interrelated to social structures and attributes (such as gender, family, profession, hobbies) whereas cultural identities are related to certain cultural groups or communities (such as ethnic, regional, religious). However, these two types of identities are partly overlapping, as many of the attributes may be seen both as social and cultural ones. (Petkova, 2005.)

The concept of social identity was developed in relation to the term social categorisation. It reflects the fact that the society can be seen as different categories based on social attributes (see above). Categorisation generates group behaviour and shapes social identity. It also leads to stereotyping, which is in this case collective stereotyping working as one motor in formulating in-groups and out-groups and creating collective identification. Social identity can be recognized both within individual and collective levels, these two levels continuously mingling with each other. (Petkova, 2005; Lehtonen, 2005.)

When discussing the concept of cultural identity we need to consider how culture is defined. Usually culture is defined as a system of traditions, values, customs and symbols passed from one generation to another. However, as cultural identity includes the aspect of different cultural groups (see above), it makes distinguishing between social and cultural
identities more complicated. In some cases, e.g. when discussing national, ethnic and religious identities, these two can hardly be differentiated. (Petkova, 2005, 14 - 15)

However, different types of identities with their sub-identities are neither equal nor as strong in comparison with each other. For example, inside these identities, there are groups from large social categories, such as nation, and from relational, common bond groups, such as family. These different categories establish different kinds of “WE’s”. Identities derived from these groups can vary in the way they determine one’s personal life and existence. (Castano et. al, 2006, 83 – 84.)

Different layers of identities (see figure 2) are in constant relationship with each other, and in a continuous transformation process. Each layer affects the other layers in one way or another. In this process, the individual layer is more changeable than the collective ones. In addition, the transformation process is more visible on the individual layer, and the process on that level is usually more rapid. According to Petkova (2005, 52) a collective identity (both social and cultural) is more clear and lasting, whereas the individual one is transforming and changing as well as more complicated. Within one collective identity group there may be several individual identities with their own variations and interpretations of the specific identity. On the very core of identities, there is the individual level, encircled by the social identity layer. Cultural identity is the umbrella compiling the different identities in its shelter.

![Figure 2: Different layers of identities.](image)

The concept of collective identity was first introduced in psychology. In that approach, the individual need for belongingness, identification with the members of the same group and
differentiation with non-members are the basic elements defining collective identity. The concepts of ‘self’, ‘the other’, ‘in-group’, ‘out-group’ and ‘need for belongingness’ used in the social sciences are rooted from this approach. However, each individual elaborates his / her own interpretation from the collective identity and the in-group/out-group dimension with personal variations of meanings, content and emphasis on different attributes. (Petkova, 2005.)

2. Professional and cultural identities

Professional identity is defined by Dobrow and Higgins (2005, 569) as follows: the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role. It is also a way to apprehend meaning to work as a subjective assigning of a meaning (Olesen, 291). However, as identities in general, professional identity is not a fixed identity but changes and develops over a period of time.

Identity transformation process begins when one is choosing his / her educational and professional objectives, and the process goes on more or less consistently (depending on individual attribution and experiences) throughout the whole life. Professional identity is in crisis or at least questionable during transition phases, e.g. when transiting from education to working life or from one working place to another or in choosing re-education. People develop their professional identities through the exploration of multiple selves, relationships or organisations. For successful realisation, one needs two metacomptencies: self-knowledge and adaptability. Active development requires ability to process feedback about the self in order to achieve self-awareness. (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005, 567 – 570.)

In formulating professional identity, three stages can be recognised: not being aware of one’s identity, searching for one and achieving one. Professional identity can be recognised on different levels: material (such as the salary or working conditions), symbolic (e.g. agronomists with laptops symbolising modern countryside or nurses in white clothes symbolising health and cleanliness) and values (e.g. improving rural life, helping and healing people). However, recognising and identifying one’s professional identity is not an automatic and easy process, and therefore students and employees need support. Educational and labour market structures as whole are responding to this need. (Petkova, 2005, 52 – 53; Social Identities, 2006.)

Motivation plays an important role in forming and re-forming the professional identity as in most processes related to social identity. It can be argued that in developing professional identity, motivation, emotions and cultural influences are among the key factors. The notion of profession in itself has a double meaning. It implies the idea about exciting and challenging tasks and it guarantees social security and a social position. The main motivations of social identity processes, belongingness and reduction of uncertainty, are thereby seen in the formulation of professional identity, too. (Olesen, 2001, 293; Dobrow & Higgins, 2005; Social Identities, 2006.)
Life history may be one of the motives leading a person to choose a specific field of education or a career and in doing so, formulating professional identity. Life history may assign specific meanings and ambivalences to experiences and so shape the tension between defence reactions and learning potentials. For a teacher, knowing some background of a student’s life history would be helpful in seeking the best possible ways to support the learning processes.

In addition to life history, and partly overlapping with that, the mechanisms formulating professional identity are family background and values, environment, education, life experiences and personality factors. ‘Self’ is creating certainty and belongingness through feedback from different social reference groups, i.e. mirroring with ‘the other’ and through life experiences.

Professional identity is one of the sub-identities inside social identity. Nevertheless, it also overlaps with the cultural layer. Professional identity appears both on individual and collective levels (see Social Identities, 2006). From an individual's point of view, social and individual realities are integral. When it comes to cultural influences, there are many constant elements that affect one’s identity development either implicitly or explicitly.

In enhancing professional identity in an intercultural context, cultural identity needs to be considered as well. Cultural identity is the base of identification in building intercultural awareness and realising the significance of intercultural communication skills, which are some of the attributes of professional identity in our field of study: professional identity as one element within the course of intercultural communication. When professional contents are integrated into foreign language and communication courses, students have an opportunity to develop their professional identity in cooperation with other students. In studying of this kind, language becomes a medium to develop professional competence and professional identity. In addition to language, intercultural communicative competence includes knowledge, skills, feelings, attitudes and adjustment as well. The competence as a whole can be supported through intercultural and language courses.

When a student’s own identity is taken into account in planning and carrying out the curriculum, the students can use their own potential, previous knowledge and skills to learn and to build up communicative competence more efficiently. Learning a foreign language is transformed into learning a personal foreign language based on the student’s own goals, needs and background. Personal learning goals should be considered in building communicative competence as well, as the content of competence may vary to some extent depending on a student’s needs. To be able to consider a student’s personality, a teacher needs to observe and support personal identity, both as a part of language as well as intercultural communication studies. (Jaatinen, 2007.)

3. Practical methods of supporting the development of social and professional identity

Supporting students in developing their educational and professional identities can be a significant resource in teaching intercultural communication and foreign languages. Since
identities are in continuous development, students often need support in contemplating their own identity.

The practical examples used in this study come from our courses at North Karelia University of Applied Sciences. North Karelia University of Applied Sciences (NKFAS) is the easternmost University of Applied Sciences in Finland and the European Union. We operate in North Karelia and education is given in four towns: Joensuu, Kitee, Lieksa and Nurmes. NKUAS has approximately 4000 students and 400 staff members. Bachelor education is given on seven different fields: Social Sciences, Business and Administration; Natural Sciences; Culture; Technology; Communication and Transport; Social Services, Health and Sports; Natural Resources and the Environment; Tourism, Catering and Domestic Services.

In Finland, all students studying at universities of applied sciences are required to study at least three languages. Usually the languages are Finnish, English and Swedish (the second official language in Finland). The statute regarding studies at universities of applied sciences states that students need to acquire such knowledge of written and spoken language in one or two foreign languages that is needed for professional practice and development. At degree programmes in nursing and rural industries, intercultural communication is taught as a part of foreign language studies.

In the following chapters we present practical methods that we use on intercultural communication and foreign language courses to support the students in developing their professional identity. The methods presented in this paper are autobiographical approach, cases, group discussions and drama.

3.1. Autobiographical (life-history) approach

In order to support the construction of individual (personal) identity during intercultural communication and foreign language courses, the students need to be provided with time and opportunities to consider their life history, motivation and goals (see page 7). Examples of approaches used in studying various identities are e.g. life-history approach, and autobiographical approach. A life-history approach can be carried out e.g. in the form of formulated discussions or interviews. An approach of this kind takes into account the historical, social, and local contexts of identity formation (Moore, 2006, 160). In an autobiographical approach, students narrate their own history often in the form of a written autobiography. In autobiographical writing foreign language serves as a natural part of the student’s growth and development. (Jaatinen, 2007, 18, 69).

Professional identity can be seen both as a part of an individual identity but also as a collective identity creating group coherence. In the beginning of the foreign language courses in nursing, students write an autobiography where they discuss their personal and educational history, learning styles, goals and reasons for choosing a career in nursing. This kind of writing is also used in the beginning of intercultural communication studies in the degree programme in rural industries. There the emphasis is laid on personal and educational history as well as students’ own experiences within intercultural context.
Furthermore, learning styles and strategies are tested and discussed in the beginning of the language studies. In adult education, we also organise group discussions in order to discuss students’ language learning history together. In these discussions, the students can reflect their learning experiences, skills and needs in small groups (4-5) together with a teacher. With the help of these discussions, we have been able to recognize both resources and obstacles for learning. In addition, students have been able to give each others support in the beginning of the studies. This process is continued throughout the studies in students’ written self-evaluations.

Students’ own experiences, language skills and needs create a basis for learning a personal foreign language (see Jaatinen 2007). When learning a language as well as learning intercultural communication becomes personal, it increases motivation as well as effectiveness of the learning process. We remember things better when learning is clearly connected to our lives, thoughts and emotions. In experiential learning in foreign languages and intercultural communication language is used as a tool for communication. Therefore, it offers numerous opportunities to build one’s personal and professional identity. According to Jaatinen (2007, 6) the foundation of professionally oriented foreign language teaching is to understand the learning of a language as a professional skill. Furthermore, Jaatinen (2007) puts emphasis on the fact that life itself is fulltime learning, an entity with remarkable parts from different fields of life, at its best formulating alive learning environment when the different fields are taken into account in teaching.

3.2. Cases

When foreign language and intercultural communication learning is organized around professional contents, students can develop their professional identity both on an individual but also on a collective level. One example of studying of this kind is working with cases. Students work in a group with a case that is connected to their studies e.g. a patient or client with various problems. The language used in the case is the target language (on our courses English or Swedish) and the students work on the case discussing it together by using the foreign language. When working with a case students can integrate their previous knowledge and experience as well as the knowledge acquired during their education to interpret the case and to try to find various ways to help the patient or the client. Working in a group gives them a wider perspective on the issue at hand. Furthermore, they need to be able to motivate their arguments and find solutions that the whole group can agree on. While working with the case they also learn to argue, question and justify in a foreign language.

In case work cultural aspects are also present. When the cases are set in health care organizations, there are always different cultures present (e.g. hospital culture, various social welfare organisations, nursing culture). This aspect can be developed further by creating the case with a patient (or a health care professional) coming from a foreign culture. In these cases, students are presented with numerous problems e.g. how does the patient understand our health care system, what kind of differences are there in the concepts of health and sickness, how pain is experienced and expressed. In the degree programme in rural industries, the cases are formulated in professional settings connected
with advising and working in customer services, encountering new people and situations in multicultural environments either nationally or internationally. Students also need to consider their own communication style as well as nonverbal communication. Integrating language and communicative competence learning into professional contents allows us to consider different values and competences linked to students’ own professional field. By allowing students to work with these issues they also get an opportunity to consider aspects related to their professional identity.

3.3. Group discussions

Group discussions provide students with opportunities to reflect their own values, thoughts and experiences. In the degree programmes in nursing and rural industries group discussions are used e.g. in teaching intercultural communication. In groups students define their own culture as well as various sub-cultures. They also discuss stereotypes related to different cultural groups. Discussing values is an important element in nursing education. When working in groups students can reflect their own values and attitudes as well as get feedback from other group members. Working in groups is one way to support students’ professional identity development both within the individual and collective levels.

3.4 Drama

Another method, which has been used in foreign language and intercultural communication teaching in the degree programmes in rural industries and nursing, is drama. By dramatising concrete working-life situations the students have an opportunity to practise communication both in the role of a nursing professional and a client. (Jaatinen 2007, 98-99). Learning of this kind is an example of experiential language and intercultural communication learning. When the student’s take a role either as a nurse or a client, they get a better view of the aspects affecting communication. In drama exercises we can also focus on nonverbal communication as well as problems affecting communication when we meet a person coming from a foreign culture.

The method that has proved to be most successful in this context is process drama. Process drama is a teaching method that is based on theatre arts. It is a method of teaching and learning where both the students and teacher are working in and out of role. O’Neill (1995) describes process drama as a method that is used to explore a problem, situation, theme or series of related ideas or themes through the use of the artistic medium of unscripted drama.

In process drama students and the teacher create a chain of events which is set in a health care setting. We go through the events by using various drama techniques such as pantomime, improvisation, frozen image, hot seating, and simulations. In process drama there is always a conflict of some kind (e.g. a conflict between a patient and a nurse, a patient and a health care organisation, a nurse and the family). The goal is to discuss the conflict, analyse it, and find different perspectives and eventually to try to find a solution of some kind. What has been most fruitful with this approach is the fact that the students
need to use their skills and knowledge comprehensively and to work together as a group in order to find a solution. By being engaged in a drama process, students have a chance to practise being a nurse or an agromist in a safe environment. They also receive feedback and assistance from the group and the teacher. They have an opportunity to experience how it feels to be a patient or a member of the family, or other roles connected to real working life situations. For the purposes of developing professional identity, the concepts of ‘self’ and ‘the other’ are not only present but also experienced. As in other experiential learning methods, language in drama is used as a tool for communication – not as a secret code one has to master. Reflection is an essential part of drama exercises, especially process drama. Learning takes place especially in reflection when various experiences and emotions created by drama are discussed and evaluated.

4. Discussion

Paying attention to students’ own identities as well as assisting them in developing their professional identity can be important resources in teaching intercultural communication and foreign languages. When teaching acknowledges students’ individual identities and aims at creating situations where the development of their professional identities is supported, learning becomes more motivating and effective. Consequently, in learning a foreign language the focus is on learning a personal foreign language, which is used as a tool for communication. The emphasis is on learning communication – not a language as a code.

In our opinion, when this approach is used during the studies, the students will be more confident with their communication and interaction skills when they enter the working life. We see that the needs of the working-life always need to be present in planning our teaching. By enhancing and supporting the growth of professional identity a teacher can aim to build intercultural awareness as well. Thus, teaching intercultural communication and foreign languages can play an important part in training empathetic and culturally-sensitive professionals that are able to meet the demands of rapidly internationalizing working life. These skills should not be taken as given, they have to be built up and supported throughout the education.

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