Exploring intercultural learning through a blended course about open education practices across the Mediterranean

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Abstract—This paper presents and reflects upon the training course organized by the OpenMed project, aimed at building capacity in Open Educational Resources (OER) and Open Education approaches across universities from the South Mediterranean, namely in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Palestine. The course, which is currently being piloted among 10 universities, represents an example of an intercultural and multilingual learning experience, both from the way in which it was conceived and developed, to the way it is actually being delivered. In this paper, we reflect on the challenges and benefits of adopting such an open approach towards intercultural learning.

Keywords: blended learning, intercultural learning, Mediterranean region, Open Education, Open Educational resources.

I. INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERCULTURALLY IN ONLINE LEARNING

One of the strongest trends in contemporary learning, together with the pervasiveness of technology and the increasing connectedness of learners, is the potential for intercultural engagement/exchange within the learning setting - both in formal and informal contexts. Three trends exemplify this: first, universities are seeing an increase in their recruitment of international students; second, ICT-supported student mobility, also known as online international learning is becoming a pillar of university collaborations; third, open courses such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are being launched targeting learners regardless of their geographic and cultural background. Intercultural learning is particularly important in countries that, due to their demographic and socioeconomic context, witness a massification phenomenon with respect to Higher Education. Nonetheless, our understanding of the challenges and dynamics of what happens within intercultural learning settings is often still limited to how intercultural learning was defined before the social media revolution.

II. THE OPENMED COURSE: BUILDING CAPACITY ON OPEN EDUCATION ACROSS THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION

The course Open Education: fundamentals and approaches: A learning journey opening up teaching in higher education aims to build capacity in Open Educational Resources (OER) and Open Education approaches across universities from the South Mediterranean, namely in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Palestine. The course, which is developed in the frame of the OpenMed project with the support of the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union, is running its pilot phase from September 2017 to March 2018,
targeting 70 academics from Higher Education Institutions in the South Mediterranean. Following the pilot phase, the course will be improved taking into account the feedback received by learners, the data gathered and the dynamics observed, and will then be made openly available. The plan is to make the course available both in the present structure (where universities have to activate the course by enrolling a number of professors) and in a fully online self-learning fashion, so to allow independent learning by any interested educator.

In terms of learning outcomes, on successful completion of the course, learners will be able to: a) Understand the potential advantages of adopting OER and open education approaches in different contexts, b) Understand how content released under different kinds of open licences can be reused and apply open licenses to their content, c) Search for, reuse and remix OER, d) Understand what MOOCs are and how to produce MOOCs, e) Adapt OER and MOOCs to their specific context and f) Incorporate open educational practices into their daily teaching.

The OpenMed course is taking a very practical approach towards Open Education, with the idea that, after having taken the course, learners shall be able to use OER and implement open teaching practices in their daily teaching work. Further, the course takes a strong contextualisation approach, starting from the fact that a lot of resources and courseware of good quality exist – mostly in English – that could be tailored and adapted to the needs of the learning communities of the Mediterranean region, increasing the effectiveness of content production through economies of scale of content contextualisation.

In order to be as practical and adaptable as possible, the course is taking an active learning approach, composed of three phases, whereby online learning is complemented through a number of activities and by an intense hands-on project work.

Phase 1) The course starts with an intense face-to-face moment, gathering the learners participating in the pilot phase of the course and aiming at creating a learning community and ad starting up the learning activities.

Phase 2) Learners go through an online learning phase, during which they are expected to take the course modules and to complete the activities proposed. This phase is run through Local Learning Circles [1], meaning groups of learners who meet face to face to collaboratively run the online course and activities, that will be established in all the participating universities. Each Learning Circle is coordinated by a team of Local Facilitators, who are in charge of organising meetings, supporting learners, assessing activities, and reporting back to the community. In terms of content, the training programme covers the following themes: Introducing Openness in Education, Open Licensing and Copyright, Creating and reusing OER, Localising OER and MOOCs and Open Educational Practices.

Phase 3) Following the online learning experience, learners are expected to apply the skills they have acquired to develop a project work aiming at opening up their teaching. The project work is fully integrated with the online phase and builds upon five steps that are taken at the end of each module: Step 1 Make a pledge for opening up your course/teaching, Step 2 Identify open licences that you will apply to your teaching/course, Step 3 Use OER in your teaching/course, Step 4 Localise OER to your course/context and Step 5 Develop an open teaching plan and share it with the community. Ideally, each project work should end up with the creation of some sort of OER properly licensed and complemented by a tailored open teaching strategy, that shall then be used by the learners who produced them – as well as by other educators - within their teaching activities.

III. INTERCULTURAL ASPECTS WITHIN THE THE OPENMED COURSE

The OpenMed course is an example of an intercultural learning experience in many ways.

First, it is based on a pedagogical approach that privileges collaboration and reflection for individual learning, leaving space for collaborative learning and knowledge co-creation among learners from different cultural backgrounds. The course adopts Fink’s [2] integrated approach to course design, which is based on a taxonomy, which goes beyond rote learning, or straightforward application of skills, towards the development [2] of more creative, engaging and reflective learning experiences as both process and outcome. Fink’s taxonomy builds on that of Bloom, by adding in elements such as the social dimension of learning, attention to human interaction and motivation, in addition to a focus on cognition. The central tenet of the model is that course design needs to incorporate significant learning goals and learning activities and appropriate techniques for feedback and assessment. In lie with this, the aim for the OpenMed course is to create a significant learning experience for those involved, respecting and actually building upon the different cultural and contextual backgrounds of participants, enhancing social interactions with others [2].

Second, the course has been designed and produced in a fully collaborative fashion by a multinational team composed of experts from the two shores of the Mediterranean, taking into account, as much as possible, the features and needs of the target population and the learning habits of each involved community. In the planning phase of the course, a number of important differences among the target learners’ communities emerged, both in terms of language – in Morocco for example both Arabic and French are used in tertiary education, depending on the university and on the subject area, and of starting understanding of basic concepts related to Open Education – the very term Open Education is declined in different ways across the Mediterranean, in some cases being used as a synonymous of online learning. In order to take these differences into account as much as possible without giving up the idea of launching the same course targeting different countries, subjects and target stakeholders, all course aspects have been debated and negotiated across the authoring team, to reach the optimal balance between the needs of the learners from all participating universities. In line with this approach, the course content is available in English, French and Arabic.

Third, the course contains a module on adaptation of OER and MOOCs to the specificities of the involved target
communities. This module develops the competences to adapt OER to the local contexts of the Middle East and the Maghreb, as well as to address an international audience. Both the contribution of intercultural communication skills and the management of multicultural groups are showcased. Learners receive specific training on how to reuse and adapt contents to their regional contexts, with practical recommendations to overcome institutional barriers and improve local relevance. On the other hand, they are instructed on how to manage groups of students with different languages and different academic traditions. The module presents the concept of cultural distance [3], the model of psychological acculturation [4] and the theory of intergroup relations [5, 6].

Fourth, it is based on collaborative local learning circles, where learners have the possibility to customize and localize the course to their needs, encouraging the application of course content to real-life problems, having facilitators who care about the subject of open education and who desire to interact well with learners, and having good systems in place for feedback and assessment.

Fifth, through the course discussion forum, the learning circles are encouraged to discuss about the themes of the course, through a concrete intercultural and peer to peer learning experience, allowing for exchange of views, practices, ideas among colleagues coming from different universities, countries and cultural settings.

IV. CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT TO DATE

The OpenMed course is at the moment running its pilot phase, but we can already draw some lessons in terms of intercultural learning in a field such as the one of Open Education.

1. As already shown by the work of the eMundus project [7], the degree of internationalisation of the university seems to be an indicator of readiness to adopt OER and Open Education approaches, probably because of the inner collaboration nature of these approaches. In addition, it seems we are facing a self-reinforcing process: international experiences predispose for the incorporation of Open Educational Practices (OEP) and the incorporation of OEP contributes to the internationalization of the university. In the next phases of the course, it will be important to reach beyond the most internationally exposed South Mediterranean universities, finding a way to engage also other institutions from the region.

2. There seem to be no major problems in terms of multinational collaboration among learners, as demonstrated by the rather fluent communications in the course discussion forums: provided that learners have a clear common mission, collaboration is taking place both at the level of the Local Learning Circles – as expected – as well as at the general course level.

3. There seems to be some significant cultural distance elements between European and southern Mediterranean countries, for instance in the degree of power distance to teachers and the relevance of group harmony. There are also some differences in academic traditions in the Middle East and the Maghreb (e.g. English or French influences).

However, the common Mediterranean style of open communication seems to be an effective facilitator to overcoming those potential intercultural barriers.

4. Two important elements for the localisation of OER appearing during the pilot are the organisational characteristics of the university in which they are going to be used and the local needs. That is why it is important to take into account the institutional policies regarding the use of educational content and complement (or adapt) the contents with examples and materials that are locally relevant. All learners committed to produce an OER at the end of the course and to experiment some sort of open practice, and this will show in practice the potential benefits of using Open Education approaches. But, for this to be successful, institutional policies of the learners’ universities must be ready to accept some sort of openness, otherwise the risk is that learners will gain competences and produce knowledge that they cannot actually apply in their daily teaching.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Openness in Higher Education (HE) seems a common-sense approach for enabling equal and democratic access to knowledge, especially in countries such as the ones from the South-Mediterranean region where massification of Higher Education is an important trend. If universities really want to open up to larger students and researchers cohorts without dramatically increasing their budgets, it is essential that the open sharing of resources is encouraged, that knowledge is shared and spread, and that teachers are stimulated to network and collaborate on course development.

The enthusiasm and interest being shown by the learners during the pilot phase of the course is an encouraging first step, since by using OERs teachers and students can collaborate on compiling course material and resources, opening up the classrooms to new forms of learning and increasing the potential for intercultural learning. But before this can be realised, we need – together with capacity building - a change in attitudes towards what we mean by education, teaching and learning at different levels. That is why the OpenMed course has been designed as the capacity building backbone of the OpenMed project, and is being accompanied by a number of other activities, tackling also the level of university leaders, who are developing institutional roadmaps for the adoption of openness, and the level of national and regional policy makers. At this last important level, the OpenMed project has contributed to the setup of a multistakeholder platform in Morocco, which is culminating with the Open Education for Morocco declaration, a rather unique initiative to foster OER and Open Education adoption at a system level in the country, that will hopefully ensure that the learning experience of the OpenMed course can be transferred in a sustainable perspective to as many teachers as possible in Morocco and, if this initiative will be replicated in other countries, across the whole Mediterranean region. As such, we are seeing how the bottom-up and top down actions initiated through the OpenMed project are already combining to result in actual systematic change in education practices in the Mediterranean region.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The OpenMed Course is developed within the OpenMed project, funded by the European Commission Erasmus + Programme, and is counting on the work of a number of institutions, namely: UNIMED, Mediterranean Universities Union, Italy (coordinator), Politecnico di Torino, Italy, Universidad Internacional de La Rioja, Spain, University of Seville, Spain, Coventry University, UK, Cairo University, Egypt, Alexandria University, Egypt, Cadi Ayyad University, Morocco, Université Ibn Zohr, Morocco, Birzeit University, Palestine, An-Najah National University, Palestine, Association of Arab Universities, Jordan, German Jordanian University, Jordan, Princess Sumaya University for Technology, Jordan.

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