

## CHAPTER 1

# Change and Development in the Cultural Dimension of Language Teaching, and Beyond

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**Abstract:** Ragnhild E. Lund attended the first meeting of the group which became known as Cultnet in 1997. This chapter charts some of the changes which have happened in “the cultural dimension” of language teaching since then by comparing the programme and people of 1997 with the same event in 2021. It is completed by some reflections from others who were there in 1997 and how they have changed but stayed the same in their intercultural lives.

## Introduction

In December 1997, a group of 14 PhD students, including Ragnhild E. Lund, met at the University of Durham, England, to talk about “Research Methods in Cultural Studies in Foreign Language Learning”. They were all in the midst of or about to begin their doctoral studies and had had difficulty in finding an appropriate supervisor or felt that they needed help with their research methodology. They had all been in contact with the fifteenth person present at the meeting – the author of this chapter – asking for help in some way. The best way forward seemed to be to invite them to share their concerns and help each other. This was the first meeting of a network which soon after took the name of “Cultnet” and then, in

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2021, “Cultnet: Intercultural Community for Researchers and Educators”, at its 23<sup>rd</sup> meeting<sup>1</sup> (<https://cultnetintercultural.wordpress.com/>).

The title of a second meeting, in December 1998, was – somewhat grandly – “Second International Research Students’ Conference on Intercultural Studies and Foreign Language Teaching”, with a significant change from “cultural” to “intercultural” studies and from “learning” to “teaching”. Later meetings were sometimes described as “symposium” or “meeting” and eventually as “meeting” and not “conference”. This is important because the function of the meetings is to provide an opportunity for talking about work in progress rather than presenting completed studies.

One of the purposes of this chapter is to compare programmes and topics in 1997 with those of 2021 in order to consider what this tells us about the “cultural dimension” in language teaching and its evolution. I use the phrase “cultural dimension” deliberately as a cover term, since terminology has also changed, reflecting the field’s deeper changes. This comparison is a case study which, while it cannot be generalised, can stimulate analysis and reflection in other cases and, perhaps, in the field in general, whatever terminology is used to designate this field.

## From 1997 to 2021

Comparing the programs from 1997 and 2021 (the latter held virtually because of the pandemic) reveals the following:

- The focus on methodology in 1997 is prominent in the title of the meeting and participants’ abstracts, whereas in 2021 methodology was present only implicitly, and topics included: citizenship, cultural identities, literature, picture books, teachers’ beliefs, internationalisation, the public engagement of universities, humanitarian aid, linguacultural encounters, pupil mobility etc.

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<sup>1</sup> The meetings have taken place every year except 2020, which was cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- In 1997 all participants, with two exceptions, were concerned with language teaching, most having practised or still practising as teachers, whereas in 2021 the proportion of topics other than language teaching was substantially higher<sup>2</sup>.
- Participants in 1997 were all presenters and, with two exceptions, were “students”, whereas in 2021 “students” were a small minority, and most presenters were in employment as teacher researchers in higher education, including some who had been students in 1997.
- In 1997 the terms used to describe the content of participants’ research included “the cultural dimension”, “teaching culture”, “promoting cultural knowledge”, and “intercultural understanding”, whereas by 2021 other terms appear such as “intercultural competence”, “intercultural awareness”, “intercultural citizens/citizenship”, and one reference to “global citizenship”.
- In 1997 oral presentations were “works in progress” dealing with plans for data collection, methods of analysis, or simply initial plans, whereas in 2021, most presentations were of completed work and, though still a “meeting”, the event had many characteristics of a “conference”.

## What does this list tell us?

Most immediately and obviously, there is a change away from worries about the research methods, which may indicate more research confidence in general and in particular that research students have sufficient guidance from their supervisors in ways not evident in 1997.

Secondly, there is an inclusion of other areas of study beyond language teaching, and even beyond education, although language teaching and education are still dominant. The network remains true to its origins.

The presence of references to “citizenship” and education for citizenship in 2021 is a third noticeable feature.<sup>3</sup>

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2 I refrain from statistical analysis since the total of 14 in 1997 became 120 participants and 53 presenters in 2021.

3 There is no denying that the membership of Cultnet Intercultural largely comprises “language people” and “language teachers”. Networks develop like rolling snowballs, bringing more people with similar interests into the group, which currently has approximately 300 members.

Fourthly, the change towards being a conference rather than a meeting for sharing work in progress perhaps indicates more certitude and maturity and, again, a reduced need for help with research design, methodology and so on.

Fifthly, the membership of the network and the presenters at the 2021 meeting include many people who are well established in their careers and who supervise their own PhD students, and this suggests that the field has acquired a degree of maturity and recognition. Such recognition is for both research and teaching, since such people are now also teaching university courses which reflect their research interests.

Finally, the shift in terminology and the strong presence of “intercultural” and to a lesser degree “citizenship” in 2021 suggests a considerable conceptual change as well as a widening of the focus from “language”.

In short, in the specific case of this network of researchers and researcher teachers, there have been substantial changes over the period of two decades or so. Some changes are peculiar to the case – the characteristics of participants and their presentations – and some are probably indicative of developments in research on “cultural studies / intercultural competence”: broadening of focus from language to citizenship as well as from education to migration and de-colonising. Similar changes can doubtless be observed elsewhere<sup>4</sup>.

## Will the trends continue?

Future-gazing is notoriously fraught with problems, but the significance of the “intercultural” in a time of globalization, migration and constant interaction among people of different origins and identities is not difficult to predict. Research on social issues that include education will follow – and try to anticipate – societal evolution. The widening of focus in the Cultnet meetings, both within education and beyond

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4 At about the same time as Cultnet was founded, the International Association of Language and Intercultural Communication (IALIC) grew out of a series of conferences on “Cross-Cultural Capability”. A similar analysis could be carried out if its programs are still available ([www.ialic.international](http://www.ialic.international)).

education, is not difficult to predict, either. Although this book is concerned primarily with language teaching, it is also predictable – or at least desirable – that language teaching should also turn its attention to societal changes.

## And what about the people?

Apart from any intrinsic value this analysis may have, the Cultnet network is, perhaps primarily, a collection of people. Changes in the field of study depend on the research interests and academic careers of such people.

In 1997, the PhD “students” included some recent undergraduates and others in the midst of their career, usually in teaching. The recent undergraduates are now senior academics, and those in mid-career have entered into active retirement – or in one important case is about to do so.

One of the senior academics says that since 1997 she has “come full circle – in a roundabout way! – and am now immersed in care ethics theory and decolonisation”. Another says her ideas have changed substantially:

I (now) think what’s important is not what to teach about culture but what attitudes we, teachers and students, should hold toward others’ cultures. It is widely accepted that we should respect others’ cultures, but it is easier said than done. When a foreign cultural behavior, belief, or value really challenges the core value of my culture, how should I respond to it? And how should I teach my students?

She also emphasises how she would now like to “teach my students through the lens of foreign cultures, how they can understand their own culture more and value it”.

Of those who moved into active retirement, one says:

The voluntary work in which I am engaged draws daily on my experience of straddling the divide between different worlds – regions and nations in the UK, the UK and other nation-states, education and business/industry, private sector and public sector ... all call for mediation between different aspects of the *other*.

Another retiree, who is also working voluntarily, says:

In this voluntary work I have helped African asylum seekers who speak French to find their way through the cultural maze of the British asylum system (I speak French). Intercultural teaching has meant that I have a heightened awareness of a person's cultural identity.

As for the one about to retire, last and most important, Ragnhild refers to her research<sup>5</sup> on and development of curricula and textbooks as connected with the “cultural dimension of FLT”, explaining that her work has resulted in a book: *Teaching English Interculturally*. She too refers to working with immigrants:

For me, the most fruitful way to work with ICC has been via our growing immigrant population. Most teachers have quite diverse classrooms. When we discuss the opportunities and the challenges of this situation, we get concrete examples that can be related to the teaching and learning – and the use – of English as well.

Whether Ragnhild will follow others into voluntary work is not for me to predict or even suggest. Retirement has many options and, yes, duties, but whatever she does, she has an enviable achievement on which to lean.

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5 Ragnhild provided her notes in answer to a request sent to everyone at the first meeting without knowing the true purpose behind this request. I hope she will forgive this minor deception.