

Promoting Cultural Literacy: Teaching Dialogue and Argumentation Skills for Collaborative Engagement through Tolerance, Empathy, and Inclusion

Associate Professor Tuuli Lähdesmäki, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Over the last decades, the Council of Europe and the European Union have been steadfast in their efforts to combat intolerance, prejudice, racism, and exclusion in European societies. In recent years, European policymakers have addressed these attempts with diverse concepts and terms, including cultural literacy. The DIALLS project (Dialogue and Argumentation for Cultural Literacy Learning in Schools), funded by the European Commission through its Horizon 2020 Programme between 2018 and 2021, sought to respond to the need to foster greater social inclusivity and collaboration in Europe by exploring young Europeans' cultural literacy and developing it in formal education. Led by Fiona Maine at Cambridge University, DIALLS brought together a multidisciplinary team of experts from ten universities across nine countries. The project's objective was to teach children and young people the dialogue and argumentation skills necessary for co-creating and engaging collaboratively with tolerant, empathetic, and inclusive behaviours.

Cultural literacy is not a new concept in scholarship. In previous research, it has, though, included normative meanings. In redefining cultural literacy, the DIALLS project departed from the traditional, narrow perspective that viewed it simply as knowledge gained through exploring cultural products or canonical historical facts. The idea of becoming culturally literate by learning selected facts and features of one's own or others' culture, history, and heritage has serious limitations. It does not recognise culture within society as an inherently plural, constantly transforming, and fluid social construction based on interaction between diverse people. In addition, the emphasis on factual knowledge of culture, history, and heritage may direct people to perceive others as stable representatives of their culture or community. This may even lead to cultural stereotyping, making it difficult to see people as cultural individuals. Most importantly, learning facts is not the co-creation of knowledge; it does not encourage learning with or from others. Instead, DIALLS conceptualised cultural literacy as a social practice that emphasises engaging with cultures and the co-creation and co-expression of cultural identities. This perspective encourages learning together through tolerant, empathic, and inclusive interactions with others.

The heart of DIALLS was the Cultural Literacy Learning Programme, tested in seven countries and involving, at the end, around 350 teachers and 10,000 students. Data collection during the test phase, including observations, lesson recordings, teacher feedback, and surveys, yielded encouraging results, prompting the programme's finalisation and accessibility via the project website (dialls2020.eu). The final programme, comprising 10 lessons, is tailored for three age groups (5 to 15 years old). The lessons suit various kinds of learners, including adults.

The programme revolves around themes of living together, social responsibility, and belonging, building on sub-topics of the celebration of diversity, solidarity, equality, democracy, human rights, globalisation, social and civic competences, citizenship, cooperation, active participation, sustainable development, heritages, values, identities, and cultural expression. Each lesson incorporates watching a wordless short film, followed by class and small group discussions and creative tasks. The interactive nature of the programme promotes sharing interpretations among classes, fostering a sense of global collaboration. The project website includes instructions for starting the programme, professional development material for

teachers and educators, lesson prompt cards, and a library that includes descriptions of 145 wordless picture books and short films, of which 60 are open access.

The pedagogy of the programme draws on dialogic teaching, emphasising co-constructing meanings, joint knowledge production, and modelling democratic engagement in dialogue. The positive outcomes of classroom interaction studies underscore the effectiveness of this approach.

DIALLS contributed three policy briefs for European education policymakers and educators. Recommendations include reducing policy ambiguity by being explicit and precise with the concepts used in them; combining dialogue and argumentation skills and cultural co-creation and creative practices in teaching as keys to learning tolerant, inclusive, and empathetic interaction; enabling communication among children and young people with diverse backgrounds across Europe; and integrating cultural literacy learning activities into school strategies.

Further reading:

- Maine, F., V. Cook, and T. Lähdesmäki. 2019. “Reconceptualizing Cultural Literacy as a Dialogic Practice.” *London Review of Education* 17 (3): 382–391.
- Maine, F. and M. Vrikki. Eds. 2021. *Dialogue for Intercultural Understanding: Placing Cultural Literacy at the Heart of Learning*. Cham: Springer.
- Maine, F., and A. Čermáková. 2021. “Using Linguistic Ethnography as a Tool to Analyse Dialogic Teaching in Upper Primary Classrooms.” *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 29.
- Lähdesmäki, T., Koistinen, A.-K., and Ylönen, S. 2020. *Intercultural Dialogue in the European Education Policies: A Conceptual Approach*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lähdesmäki, T., Baranova, J., Ylönen, S., Koistinen, A-K., Mäkinen, K., Juškiene, V., and Zaleskienė, I. 2022. *Learning Cultural Literacy through Creative Practices in Schools. Cultural and Multimodal Approaches to Meaning-Making*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.