The Classroom as a Storytelling Space Where the Exotic Meets and Greets the Domestic

Jagoda Szulia & Karien Brits

Summary

One of Poland's leading universities offers South African studies to Polish students of English. Here, Polish students learn about the South African reality first and foremost in cultural studies and Afrikaans-language acquisition classes. This is not as easy as it might seem at first glance. There are thousands of kilometres, in a literal and figurative sense, of almost completely unknown territory between Poland and South Africa. The distance, however, does not necessarily have to stand in the students' way to successfully and comprehensively study a subject many of them previously deemed to be essentially "exotic". In order to assure a full understanding of a given culture, one should preferably immerse oneself in it, otherwise it will remain remote and exotic. This article illustrates how to, through experiential learning and teaching, practically bridge the gap between this "exoticism" and the "domestic", well-known "Polishness" of the learners. This is done within the classroom that becomes the meeting point where two different countries and even more different cultures and languages meet.

Opsomming

Een van Pole se leidende universiteite bied Suid-Afrikaanse studies vir Poolse studente van Engels aan. Hier leer Poolse studente die Suid-Afrikaanse realiteit ken, veral in kultuurstudies en in taalverwerwingsklasse (Afrikaans). Dit is nie so maklik as wat dit met die eerste oogopslag mag lyk nie. Daar lê letterlik en figuurlik duisende kilometer se totaal onbekende terrein tussen Pole en Suid-Afrika. Die afstand hoef egter nie die studente te verhinder om 'n vak wat baie van hulle voorheen as wesenlik "eksoties" beskou het, omvattend en suksesvol te bestudeer nie. Om seker te maak dat jy 'n gegewe kultuur ten volle verstaan, behoort jy verkieslik heeltemal daarin opgeneem te word, andersins sal dit ver en eksoties bly. Hierdie artikel toon aan hoe die gaping tussen hierdie "eksotisme" en die "huishoudelike" die bekende "Poolsheid" van die leerders, deur ervaringsleer en onderrig, oorbrug word. Dit word gedoen binne die klaskamer wat die ontmoetingspunt word waar twee verskillende lande en selfs meer verskillende kulture en tale ontmoet.

JLS/TLW 27(1), Mar./Mrt. 2011
ISSN 0256-4718/Online 1753-5387

DOI: 10.1080/02564718.2011.557236

1 Introduction – Building Bridges

Nothing is a waste of time
if you use the experience wisely.
(Auguste Rodin in Toliver 2004: 138)

A whole spectrum of reactions is presented to us when we mention the South African Specialization in one of Poland's universities[1] – ranging from mild surprise through disbelief to sheer scepticism. Among the most frequently asked questions are: Why do Polish students want to enrol in this programme? What and how do you teach them? And, last but not least – How do you make them stay? The "what" and the "how" of our teaching are perhaps the most interesting of the questions, though not unproblematic, and the only ones we will venture to answer in this article. The South African programme encompasses a variety of subjects, of which the main ones are cultural-literary studies and language acquisition. The choice we are faced with is whether to homogenise and present the material in strictly theoretical terms, thus making it no different from that taught in the general program, or contextualise every single bit of information we put forth remembering that the keyword is South Africa. And although the latter seems to be the more reasonable option, it does, however, involve forcing students to reach way beyond the scope of their experience and having them think and reason outside their usual mindsets. They learn about a country with many tongues, cultures, philosophies that are distinctly different from their own. This, naturally, begs the question – Can a legitimate dialogue between these two worlds take place with the study object ten thousand kilometres away, and when all we have at our disposal is a set of preformed (mis)conceptions and virtually no first-hand experience of Africa? And how does one internalise this "exotic" material? In this article we want to give some practical examples of how we went about trying to bridge the gap between the Exotic and the Domestic by means of experiential teaching.

However, before we delve into a discussion about the potential benefits of experiential learning in cross-cultural learning, we should explicate the concept of "the Exotic" as used in this article. It can be, and quite naturally so, be evocative of the colonial discourse and therefore result in a biased reading. While other, perhaps more neutral, terms such as "unfamiliar" or "foreign", might serve the purpose just as well, the notion of "Exotic" fits much better with the first year students' ideas of South Africa, or Africa in general, which are anything but neutral. These ideas come largely from, still

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1. Students opting for the South African Specialization study in the School of English at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. The specialisation, unique in Poland, includes, besides language acquisition (Afrikaans) and cultural studies, a variety of classes where students become familiar with the literature, geography and socio-political history of South Africa.

fairly popular, adventure stories in which the distinction between the domestic (white, catholic and noble, but bland) and the exotic (coloured, pagan and savage, yet alluring) is maintained. Moreover, they are reinforced on a daily basis by travel agencies and the Polish media that portray "South Africa as a country that functions in two fully separate spaces: in the one there are ancient tribes and the other one is a paradise for the European community equipped with all the necessary holiday resorts" (Zajas 2009: 124-125). Hence, the choice of words was essentially dictated by what we knew was part and parcel of an average first-year student's mindset.

2 Experiential Teaching and Learning

> Experience is not what happens to a man.
> It is what a man does with what happens to him.
> (Aldous Leonard Huxley, *Texts and Pretexts*, 1932)

The concept of experiential learning (or teaching) comprises a few ideas that should be defined before we can move on to explain how we put theory into practice. Since the emphasis is put on the word "experiential", and "learning" and "teaching" are quite self-explanatory,[2] the first issue to tackle has to be defining "experience". This part of the article will therefore be an overview of theories developed by contemporary scholars on what "experience" is and how it applies to teaching. The part, however, would not be complete without mentioning educational theorist David A. Kolb who conceived the idea of experiential learning cycles and with his pioneering research changed the face of teaching for decades to come. Finally, there will follow an analysis of how the theories discussed here were used to create a more effective learning environment for students who have to "learn Africa" from Poland.

2.1 Experience, Emotion, Education

In order to bring the concept of experiential learning into clearer focus, experience as such should be defined. As with so many terms, it is not easy to provide one, unambiguous definition and in this particular case it is so primarily because people never experience objects and events in quite the same way. The problem of explaining the exact meaning of experience becomes, according to Beard and Wilson (2006: 17), considerably complicated by previous experiences which may, and eventually will, change the interpretation of an incident including the (memory of) the experience itself.

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2. This is not to say that the two terms are plain and lacking in subtleties of meaning, but for the purpose of this article, the most transparent and common understanding of learning/teaching applies.

As a way of reconciling these disparities in individual perception the two scholars assert that experience is "the interaction between self and the external environment", which they believe conclusively constitutes "the foundation of much learning" (Beard & Wilson 2006: 19).

This does not go against what McDrury and Alterio (2003) write about the influence of students' idiosyncratic styles of making sense of the world on internalising new information. Apparently inspired by Vygotsky's school of thought they have determined that "the social and cultural resources we carry as human beings are potential learning tools" and point out that "educational environments are social creations" (McDrury & Alterio 2003: 28). This means that the classroom is a space shared by individuals to create a common experience, or if that were impossible, a space where the many experiences come together and merge to form a single unit of knowledge that will be understood by all the participants.

Yet another element to consider when discussing the common classroom experience is that in order for the students to be actively engaged in any activity, that activity has to be both intellectually and affectively involving. There is no denying that people experience emotions and experience *with* emotions and this is taken into account when talking about experiential learning and teaching. Boud, Keogh and Walker take that assumption even further and state that "denial of feelings is denial of learning" (1985: 15). This point becomes especially valid when a teacher decides to move away from the "traditional" method of giving lectures towards experiential learning, otherwise golden learning opportunities might be wasted.

To include emotions in the learning process, "a communicative space and safe environment" ought to be created for the students to gain insight into the collective meanings obtained through group work (Kohonen, Jaatinen, Kaikkonen & Lehtovaara 2001: 49). Beyond all dispute, students are to feel confident and safe so they can open up and take part in class feedback. Secondly, teachers should help students recognise and understand emotions that will later on become part of their own "learning toolboxes". Lastly, students need to be presented with general guidelines so that they know how to reflect on these emotions. In the following sections the role of reflection will be examined and it will be demonstrated how students of the South African Specialization intuitively engaged in a range of affective classroom activities.

Despite the fact that the way things are seen, heard and felt will invariably differ from person to person, one thing is undeniable, and it is the link between experience and learning. Cuffaro (in Beard & Wilson 2006: 17) puts it this way: "Action and thought are not two discrete aspects of experience. It is not to undertake an activity and then at its end to contemplate the results. What is stressed is that the two must not be separated, for each informs the other". Boud et al. express a similar idea in their book *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning* (1985) where

thought and active contemplation, or "reflection", are described as pre-requisites for the learning process. In the general context of learning, reflection encompasses "those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experience in order to lead to new understanding and appreciations" (Boud et al. 1985: 19).

In other words, for an experience to become meaningful and conducive to learning it needs to be accompanied by thought and reflection. And since no two people think and perceive alike, one needs a classroom tool to bring these divergent observations to, let us call it, a mental space where they can be used to conceptualise theories and consolidate knowledge from a shared experience. This process and the three steps it involves – experiencing, reflecting and learning – calls to mind David A. Kolb and his experiential learning cycle, which will subsequently be discussed.

2.2 Learning in Circles

Experiential learning is not only about experience – it is also about reflecting on this experience to learn from it, taking into account previous experiences. This brings us to David A. Kolb, an educational theorist, who with his groundbreaking work *Experiential Learning: Experience As the Source of Learning and Development* (1984) pioneered the field of experiential learning. He designed a four-step Experiential Learning Cycle which encompasses what has already been determined to be intrinsically linked with the learning process, namely the actual experience, the interpretation of the experience, the translation of the interpretation into abstract conceptualisations and then the application of these concepts, which again leads to the first step of experiencing (McDrury & Alterio 2003: 95). In the figure below, this cycle is presented graphically. Experiential learning can indeed be described as learning in circles.

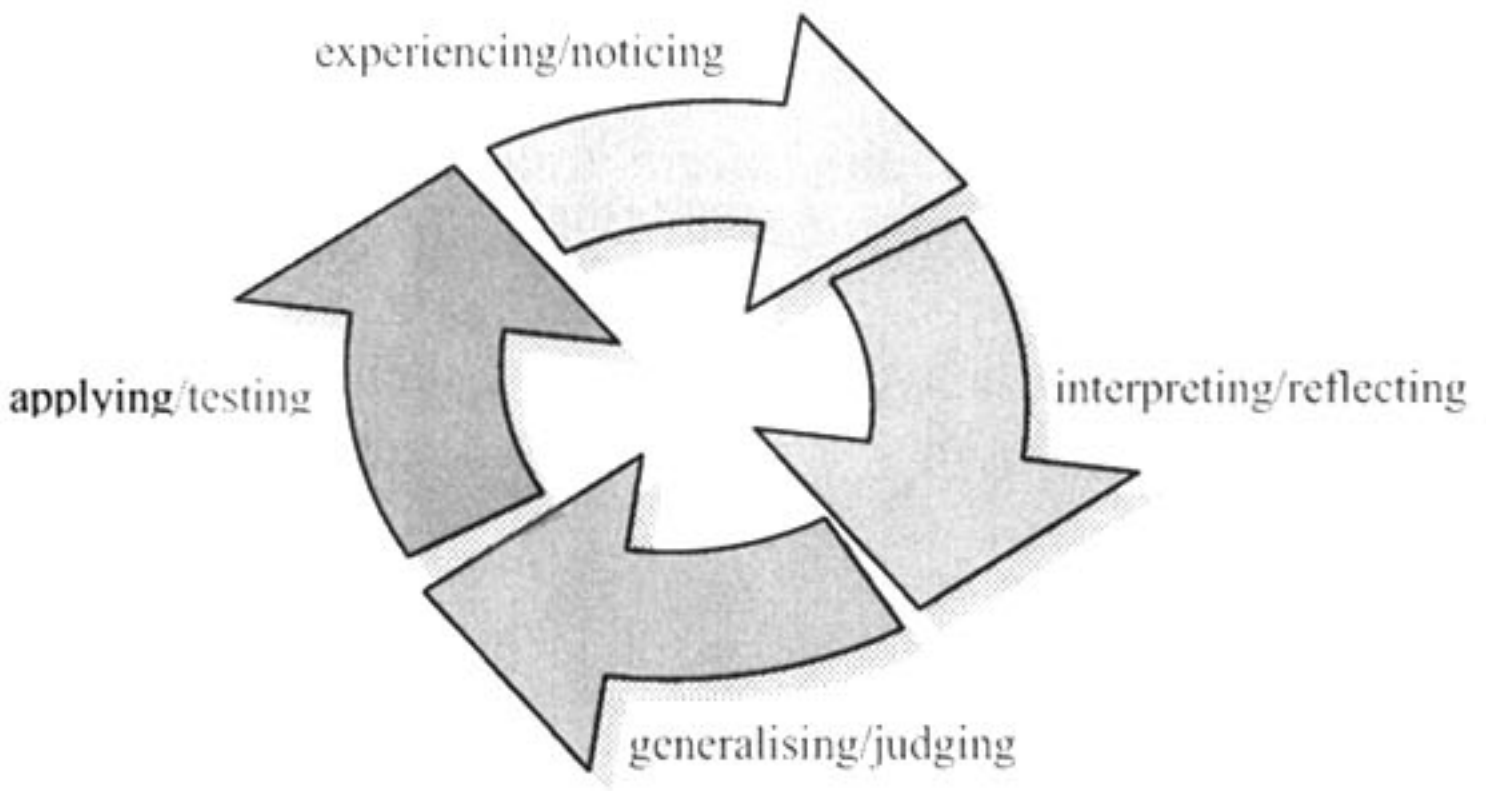

Figure 1: The Experiential Learning Cycle (after Beard & Wilson 2006: 33)

Kolb's cycle did not go unchallenged in the literature about experiential learning, and it has undergone some changes and adaptations since it was first published.[3] For the purposes of this article we focus on the discussion of Kolb's cycle by Boud et al. (1985: 13) where they point out that the student's experience should be followed by organised reflection. This reflection is crucial for learning from the initial experience, but it also helps identify the necessity to acquire other, perhaps more specific, skills before moving on to the next experience. The problem with Kolb's cycle, according to Boud et al. (p. 13), is that the composition of the observation stage and reflection is not discussed in detail. The British Further Education Curriculum and Development Unit (FEU) therefore proposed the following model (Boud et al. 1985: 13) illustrated in Figure 2.

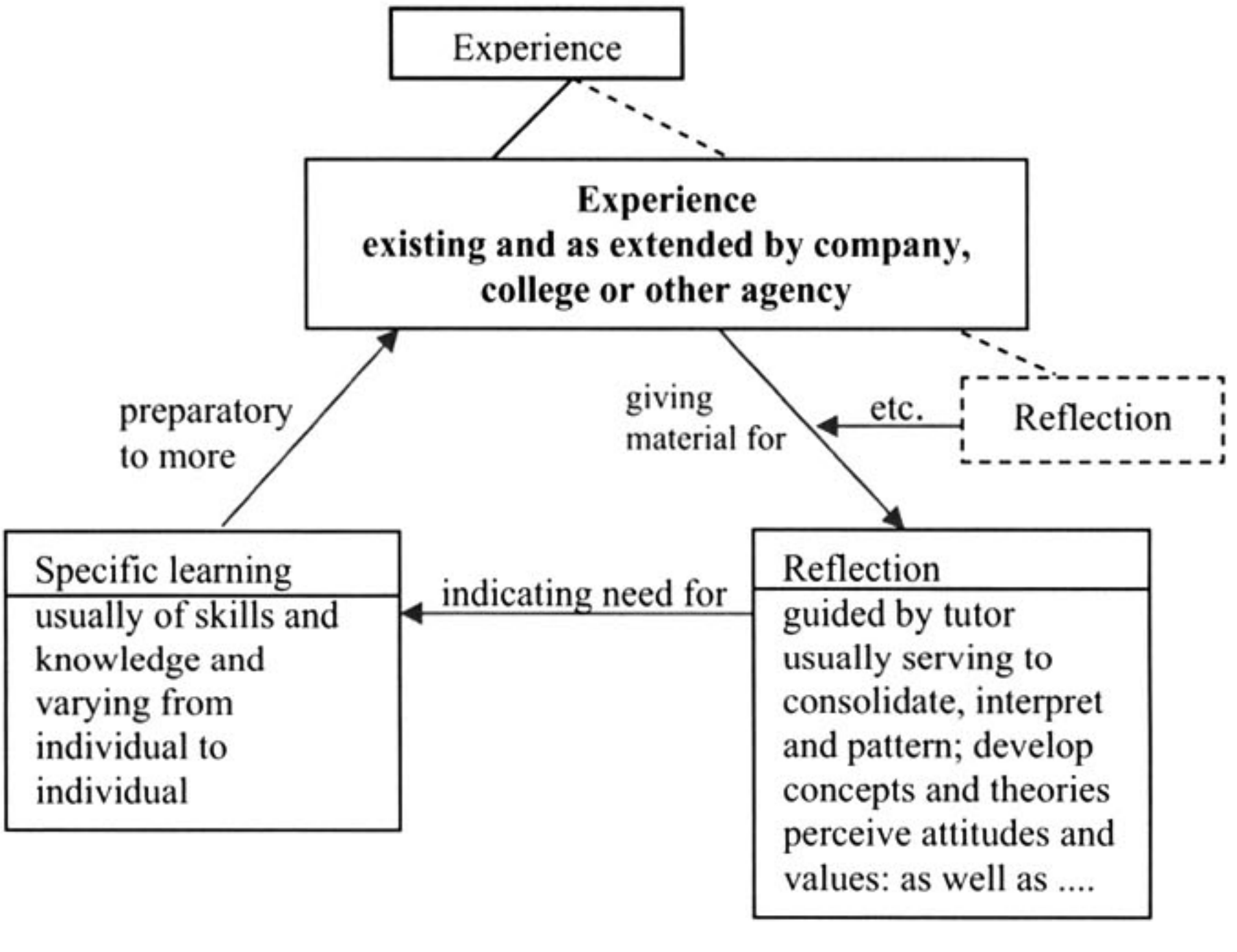

Figure 2: Adapted Experiential Learning Cycle (based on Boud et al. 1985: 13)[4]

Students do not necessarily automatically reflect on their experiences, in the classroom or outside. Often, they need structured guidance by tutors or

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3. See Beard and Wilson (2006) for the full discussion.

4. The relation between theory and practice is to be found in various cycles of Lewin, Kolb, Honey and Mumford and Deming/Shewhart. The one principle connecting these authors is the importance of linking reflection and application so as to make learning effective (Beard & Wilson 2006: 35).

teachers. According to Kolb, personal experience gives "life, texture, and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts" and "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of [such] experience" (1984: 22, 38). The question is: What makes an experience a real one and what environment (in which that experience takes place) is most conducive to learning (Beard & Wilson 2006: 128-130)? There is no straightforward answer to this question, and one is tempted to follow Susan Warner Weil and Ian McGill, both experiential theorists and educational practitioners, who concluded that it is easier "to agree on what experiential learning is not. It is definitely not the mere memorizing of abstract theoretical knowledge, especially if taught by traditional formal methods of instruction such as lecturing and reading from books" (Warner & McGill 1989: 27). Real experience, when following Warner and McGill (1989) and Beard and Wilson (2006: 135, 140, 143), could, and does include fantasy (dramas, dialogues, storytelling, etc.). How these theories were put into practice in our language and cultural classes will be discussed in the third part of this article.

3 Experiential Potential

It was mentioned before that having people think and feel identically verges on the impossible, and the only aspect of experience that one can (optimistically) take for granted is its connection with the act of learning that is the result of experiencing events. This means that one gets as many perceptions as there are students. How then, can something so manifold and constitutionally different be brought to a common denominator of internalising one particular item of knowledge? That is, of course, if there even were an experience to start with. That brings us to the next important questions that we will attempt to answer in this article: What does one do then, if already at the onset of the learning process a vital element is missing? Will the students' lack of experience of Africa inhibit their learning?

Not all specialisation students have the opportunity to confront the reality of South Africa first-hand. We are therefore forced to rely mostly on imagination and other resources to simulate reality to provide the *experiential* component of learning. It would be worthwhile to refer to Beard and Wilson (2006) again at this point, as they seem to share our views in this respect. In their book *Experiential Learning* (2006), they argue that the general concept of "the real experience", would suggest that "[h]igh levels of reality do not always present the best option for learning" (Beard & Wilson 2006: 129). They even take it a step further postulating that *if* it were impossible for learners to "experience '*the real thing*', they could of course experience something that is perceived as real, in a physical sense or an emotional sense" (Beard & Wilson 2006: 130; our italics).

Our responsibility as teachers is to establish an effective learning environment, where one can develop a dialogue with the study object and do more than just observe and register "the Exotic". By means of a variety of teaching tools – storytelling, drama, narration and performance – we create the experience that was not there to begin with. Students are taken beyond their mental frameworks and forced to expand and adjust their thinking to incorporate new knowledge. Our role in the classroom is not merely that of a teacher but also that of an "experience provider" and a facilitator who eases the students into reflection. We aim at designing an intellectual framework for creative, incorporative learning that would allow the students to construct and partake in "the Exotic", thus making it their own, "domesticating" it, so to speak, which in turn would enable them to draw on the familiar experience and internalise the newly acquired information.

The key to successfully creating an experience out of a story told in class is "narrative sympathy" (Kearney 2002: 140) – a concept that provides a direct link between experiential learning and storytelling. It is, in other words, the students' ability to generate new knowledge and (re)negotiate their identity by walking in someone else's shoes within a more or less controlled learning environment. Kearney further concludes that "it is precisely this double-take of difference and identity – experiencing oneself as another and the other as oneself – that provokes a reversal of our natural attitude to things and opens us to novel ways of seeing and being" (p. 140). Using narratives then, having students retell and relive stories, can be a powerful tool to impart knowledge while fostering student autonomy and critical thinking.

It has already been established that each person's unique past impacts on the way they perceive and conceptualise the surrounding reality. In our classes, the students' own cultural background meets and, to a considerable extent, shapes that exotic experience. Such an encounter is possible thanks to role-playing and storytelling – the two teaching devices that we believe best personalise learning. Telling stories is, according to Linde (2008: 3-4), one of the ways people present who they are and their actions in the past in order to form their identity. However, Polish students do not have a South African past to narrate and it is here that the two worlds, the exotic and the domestic, seemingly collide. In the following part we would like to present how we tried to reconcile the cultural conflict.

4 From Poland with Love

Tell me, and I will forget.
Show me, and I may remember.
Involve me, and I will understand.
Confucius (Cheung n.d.)

The above quote perfectly sums up the content and aims of what follows. In this section of the article it will be illustrated how the experiential learning theories were used to create a positive classroom environment where students not only listen and learn, but where they also, to a varying degree, get involved intellectually and emotionally in the activities chosen by the teachers. From the first section, it becomes clear that students, by contributing to class projects, create a common space where their Polish and Afrikaans identities meet and, possibly, merge. In the second and final part, students "dig deeper" and by assuming the role of *izimbongo* (praise poets), they experience a real encounter with South African culture despite being in the heart of Europe.

4.1 Experiential Learning and Afrikaans-Language Acquisition

World languages like English, French, Spanish and many others are in the fortunate position of having a wide variety of textbooks available to students and teachers. With regards to Afrikaans, the choice is limited to a few reliable sources. In Poznań we use *Colloquial Afrikaans* by Donaldson (2000) and alternatively *Teach Yourself Afrikaans* by van Schalkwyk (1993). The target audience of these textbooks is English-speaking people, which means that they had to be adapted to the needs of a Polish audience who learn English as second language.

While one is adapting the material anyway, why not do it in a way that would simultaneously enable turning language learning into a more tactile experience of the language and its culture? By rewriting the dialogues and making use of storytelling and role-playing one could immerse the students in a new world where they would have the opportunity to gain new experiences despite still being in a classroom far away from South Africa. The stories told and role-played in class reduce the abstractness of the foreign language and its culture, making it open and more concrete for the student (Noddings & Witherell 1991: 279). Although storytelling and role-playing may seem to have only an entertaining function, these methods should not be underestimated because they provide the teacher with the means to illustrate the links between theory and practice. The interactive and expressive style of storytelling and role-playing demands from students to be "actively involved in their experience" (McDrury & Alterio 2003: 22). This means that the students should use the acquired knowledge to get their message across as if they were really in South Africa.

Apart from the interactive nature of stories and dialogue, they also expand the students' "horizons of understanding and … provide rich contextual information about human actors, intentions, and experience" (Witherell 1991: 84). How this happens will be the subject of discussion in subsection 4.1.1. Another advantage of drama is its attractiveness. Many students

watch plays, films or soap operas and they are inevitably influenced by that experience.

Adapting the material was not a complicated process; the straightforward dialogues in Donaldson (2002) were changed into "soapies". We changed the names of the characters and gave the original text a twist to make the Polish students part of the dialogues. They pretended to be South African citizens or their partners; they played their part as if they were living in South Africa. The use of dialogues in soap format is not an innovation – it is for example used in *Vanzelfsprekend*, a textbook for Dutch-language acquisition (Devos & Fraeters 2004).

What is unique about the Afrikaans dialogues is that the students themselves are the actors. In these "soapies" the Polish students make friends with and marry South Africans. They live in South African cities and in the countryside. The "soapies" sometimes have open endings for the students to complete on the spot or at home where they can employ their own creativity. This means that it is not always up to the teacher to make up and control the direction in which the conversations flow. At the end of the "soaps", the students are prompted to write their own ending by using their imagination and information gathered from Afrikaans soaps ("Binnelanders", "Egoli", and "Sewende Laan", bits of which they saw in class), as well as from their history-, literature- and cultural studies classes. The writing of their own dialogues then serves as a reflection tool – not only to reflect on what they have learned in the Afrikaans class but also on what they have experienced in the other classes.

Stories and dialogues are not only entertaining, they also help students "make connections within and between self and other, subject and object, and thought and feeling" (McDrury & Alterio 2003: 34). When making the Polish students part of the story, we do not intend that they abandon their own identities; the two cultures meet halfway in the process. This is done in agreement with Kohonen et al. (2001: 62) who claim that "[t]he learning of a foreign language depends essentially on its starting point, the learner's basic culture". How we created the dialogues with the student's culture as a starting point will be illustrated in the subsection below.

4.1.1 Classroom Drama

The rewritten dialogues were not printed but were shown to students as PowerPoint slides. Apart from their obvious economic benefits, slides can be adapted easily from group to group, in this way making the experience up to date. It is easy to add pictures – and to even include pictures of the students if they wish to further personalise the experience and to make the unknown a little less daunting. Examples of rewritten dialogues, taken from van Schalkwyk (1993) and Donaldson (2002), and examples of the students' creative work are discussed to illustrate how we made use of the student's

own culture and emotions to introduce new aspects of the Afrikaans culture.[5] The discussion of the examples is broadly divided into three themes – the self (the Domestic), the other (the Exotic) and being human (emotions we have in common).

The self was the starting point in the first dialogues. The students are not immediately transformed into South Africans; in the beginning they are merely themselves. In Example 1 Justyna and Ania are Poles working for an accountant in Johannesburg. Ania is married to Jan van der Merwe, but to show her Polish identity we give her a double-barrelled surname: Lidacka-Van der Merwe.

Example 1

Me. Buczak: *Wat is u naam?* [What is your name?]
Me. Lidacka: *Ek is Ania Lidacka-Van der Merwe.* [I am Ania Lidacka-Van der Merwe.]
Me. Buczak: *En u naam?* [And your name?]
Me. Lidacka: *Ek is Justyna Buczak.* [I am Justyna Buczak.]
Me. Buczak: *Wie is die meneer?* [Who is this gentleman?]
Me. Lidacka: *Dit is my man, Jan van der Merwe.* [This is my husband, Jan van der Merwe.]

The Exotic rubs off on Ania Lidacka-Van der Merwe and in Example 2 she prepares typical Afrikaans food (leg of mutton and baked potatoes) for her husband.

Example 2

Jan: *Hallo, Ania, hoe gaan dit? Het jy na my verlang?* [Hello, Ania, how are you? Did you miss me?]
Ania: *Ja, ek was eensaam. Ek is bly jy is terug.* [Yes, I was lonely. I am glad you are back.]
Jan: *Kry'n mens dan nie 'n bietjie kos nie?* [Doesn't one get something to eat?]
Ania: *Sê eers wat jy vir my gebring het.* [First tell me what you brought me.]

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5. In a paper entitled "Speaking a language or speaking a culture? – a new take on dual literacy among Polish students who learn Afrikaans" (delivered at the African Language Symposium/Tshwane University of Technology in Pretoria in 2010) we argued that the existing textbooks and curricula are not sufficient to address the issue of Afrikaans and its various identities. Afrikaans speakers in these textbooks are for the most part white and conservative, and a whole spectrum of Afrikaans-speaking people is not portrayed at all, which was also reflected in the students' dialogues. Dedicated and integrated curriculum planning is needed to prevent this unfortunate stereotyping.

Jan: *Nee, dis 'n geheim. A! skaapboud, gebakte aartappels, ertjies.*
[No, it is a secret. A! Leg of mutton, baked potatoes, peas.]

In Example 3, Kasia, as a Pole, is married to Johan and they have two children, Wickus and Sylwia. It is noteworthy that the students chose "their" children's names to reflect the twofold experience they took part in, also on a lexical level.

In the end, we are all human beings in contact with other human beings and our universal emotions should also be reflected in the dialogues. This becomes particularly evident in a conversation between Kasia and her son (Example 3). Kasia complains that Wickus, her son, does not make time for his parents. Apart from information on how the times of the day are used, students learn how to express disappointment and difference of opinion.

Example 3

Kasia: *Wickus, kom jy vanaand terug of bly jy in Kaapstad?*
[Wickus, are you coming back tonight or are you staying in Cape Town?]

Wickus: *Nee Ma, ek kom eers môreaand weer.* [No Mum, I shall not be back again before tomorrow.]

Kasia: *Dis nou jammer. Jy het nie lank gebly nie. Ek sien deesdae so min van jou.*
[It is a pity. You didn't stay long. I see so little of you these days.]

Storytelling offers us the opportunity to travel from the cities of Johannesburg[6] and Cape Town to a farm. Theo and Karolina (the latter a Polish student) are married and they live on a farm in the North West Province (Example 4). Included in the PowerPoint presentations are photos of "their *plaas*" and their animals and in this way vocabulary is visually introduced. In Example 4 Christo and Theo are discussing farming and here the students learn that farming is a passion for Afrikaans farmers in particular, a passion which is closely connected to the history of a part of the Afrikaans community.[7]

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7. The students know that Johannesburg is known by other names such as "Joburg" and "Jozi" and these names are used in Student's Examples 1 and 2.

8. This issue is dealt with in their literature studies.

Example 4

Christo: *Hoe lank woon julle al op hierdie plaas.* [How long have you been living on this farm?]

Theo: *Ons woon al langer as tien jaar hier. Dié plaas was eers my pa s'n en hy het twintig jaar hier geboer. Ek boer al twaalf jaar, maar net die afgelope tien jaar op Rustenburg.* [We have been living here for more than ten years. This farm first belonged to my father and here he farmed for twenty years. I have been farming for twelve years, but only the past ten years on Rustenburg.]

Christo was at that stage an unknown character and the students were asked to say who Christo was and where he came from and how he knew Theo and Karolina. In the first student's example, Ania (one of the students) is talking to Christo and it turns out that he is in love with Dawid (another student in class). In a relatively "conservative" Polish community the South African "liberalism" seems fascinating and the students felt free to play with different ideas. The student, apparently driven by the common knowledge that where there is soapie, there is romance, gave the story another interesting twist: Christo apparently escaped from a jail in Burkina Faso to be with Dawid and his friends, Theo and Karolina, who are hiding him on their farm.

Student's Example 1

Ania: *Hallo Christo, hoe gaan dit? Wat doen jy in Suid-Afrika? Ek het gedink dat jy in die tronk was!*
[Hello Christo, how are you? What are you doing in South Africa? I thought you were in jail?]

Christo: *Ja, ek was in die tronk in Burkina Faso, maar ek kon nie langer in die tronk bly nie, want ek moes my kêrel, Dawid, sien. Ek het soveel na hom verlang.*
[Yes, I was in jail in Burkina Faso, but I couldn't stay longer because I had to see my boyfriend, Dawid. I missed him so much.]

In Student's Example 2 there is a conversation between Koos and Piet – typical Afrikaans names used by the author of this example. In this dialogue the author uses the place names they learned during their geography lessons in cultural studies. The dialogue in Student's Example 2 is maybe less dramatic but nonetheless romantic as we learn that Theo is aware of Christo (his brother in this dialogue) and Karolina's secret relationship and that he wants to divorce her.

Student's Example 2

Piet: *Ek was by my vriend Theo. Hy kom van Pietersburg, maar hy woon al langer as tien jaar saam met sy vrou Karolina op 'n plaas naby Mafikeng. Hulle is al twaalf jaar getroud, maar Theo moes na Jozi gaan om by sy ou ma te kuier. Hy het my gisteraand opgebel en ...*
[I was at my friend's, Theo, he comes form Pietersburg, but he has been living with his wife Karolina on a farm near Mafikeng for more than ten years. They have been married for more than twelve years, but Theo had to visit his aged mother. He called me yesterday evening and …]

Koos: *Wat is verkeerd met hom?* [What is wrong with him?]

Piet: *Hy vermoed dat sy vrou, Karolina, vir Christo liefhet.*
[He suspects his wife, Karolina, loves Christo.]

Koos: *Wie is hy?* [Who is he?]

Piet: *Christo is Theo se broer. Hy kom ook van Pietersburg, maar nou bly hy in Mafikeng.*
[Christo is Theo's brother. He also comes from Pietersburg, but is now living in Mafikeng.]

Koos: *Ag nee! Wat gaan Theo doen?* [Oh no! What is Theo going to do?]

Piet: *Ek weet nie, maar ek dink hy sal besluit om van haar te skei.*
[I don't know, but I think he will decide to divorce her.]

These "soapies" are a way of teaching language in a relatively natural environment – or as close to natural as it can be in a classroom. With the help of multimedia resources, students were welcomed to the world of Afrikaans as themselves (the Domestic), meeting South African friends and partners (the Exotic) and they gradually learned to express their emotions and thoughts in a foreign language. The open endings of the dialogues enhanced the interactive nature of the Afrikaans classes and it has become increasingly apparent from the students' own creative work that they enjoyed being in this world so remote from their own. The dialogues provided above exemplify how storytelling not only helps to "accommodate diverse realities" but also equips students with a way "to share experiences from their own cultural frame of reference" (McDrury & Alterio 2003: 35). As will be seen in the next section it is exactly what the students, this time as African praise poets, in varying degrees did.

4.2 Polish *izimbongi* – Between Politics and Poetry

In this part of the article, the authors illustrate how narration and role-play can truly "accommodate diverse realities" surpassing language acquisition. The realities in question will be the students' own and the reality of an

"exotic experience", namely, a performance of praise poetry written by the students about South African political leaders. The general outline of that "exotic experience" was provided and executed by the teacher (explaining what oral tradition is, analysing the form and content of praise poems). The students were then asked to find out as much as possible about certain South African political figures and use the acquired knowledge to write a praise poem. The performative aspect of praise poetry, the doing, being involved or experiencing, was the focal point of the task.

Photo 1: Sitting "round a bonfire" during traditional village festivities

It is generally acknowledged that learning, especially experiential learning, should not occur in isolation and that it is by nature a social process usually involving more than one person. Therefore, our students did research and authored the poems in groups of two and three, and presented their work to the class who pretended to be sitting by the fireside during traditional village festivities. From the three video clips[8] it is clear that the students, with varying degrees of intensity, drew on their own culture and personal past and created a whole new experience by incorporating (accommodating) the new, the Exotic into the Domestic without the two worlds clashing. The two cultures meet and greet, influence each other but never clash – they coexist and cooperate with each other.

4.2.1 Julius Malema

In the first praise poem, the students combined a South African theme with a Polish method of delivery to the public. Gosia and Kasia used a typical structure and melody of a responsorial psalm usually sung during mass in

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8. Videos of the students' performances that were shown at the conference. The transcripts presented in this article are faithful to the original. Poetic licence and the fact that they were first-year students account for the occasional awkward phrasing.

Polish catholic churches; a psalm in which the priest sings all the stanzas, as a rule consisting of four lines each, and the parishioners give the responsories that the priest earlier provided for them. The students started off with singing the chorus line and encouraging their classmates to sing along. The melody was picked up instantaneously as most of them, if not everybody, at some point in their lives were regular church-goers, and the only element that seemed a bit incongruous was the sarcastic and critically inclined content of the poem the girls wrote.

Responsorial psalms sung during mass customarily explicitly express praise and/or thanks, while the one presented below is rather admonitory, to put it mildly. In class, before the praise poems were written, it was explained that "[t]here are two levels on which criticism can be uttered: indirectly, as 'absence of praise', and directly, as 'presence of criticism' in the performance" of an *isibongo* (Kresse 1998: 181). The direct method was adopted here, but it should be noted that the fact that a laudatory, or hymnic, framework was employed to express criticism suggests that an attempt was made to soften the judgment. The research done before might not have brought conclusively negative (or positive) findings and the *izimbongi*, obliged to voice the popular opinion, had to take that into consideration. As a result, the following praise poem is not much more than a reflection of the general opprobrium that a youth's indelicate actions met with.

Photo 2: Kasia and Gosia reciting their poem met with enthusiastic responses

Kasia:	And together:
Chorus:	Julius Malema needs to think things through
Kasia:	After Thabo, Mandela Mbeki and Zuma Came to ANC Youth League Julius Malema
Gosia:	When his mother was struggling with the birth, something went wrong and damaged his nerves.
Chorus:	Julius Malema needs to think things through
Kasia:	His first failure was secondary school. Didn't manage to pass anything else too

Kasia: Then his ambitious plan was to help the kids, with the education and other useful tips

Chorus: Julius Malema needs to think things through

...

Together: To cut a long story short, all he does is babble instead of smart and clever political struggle.

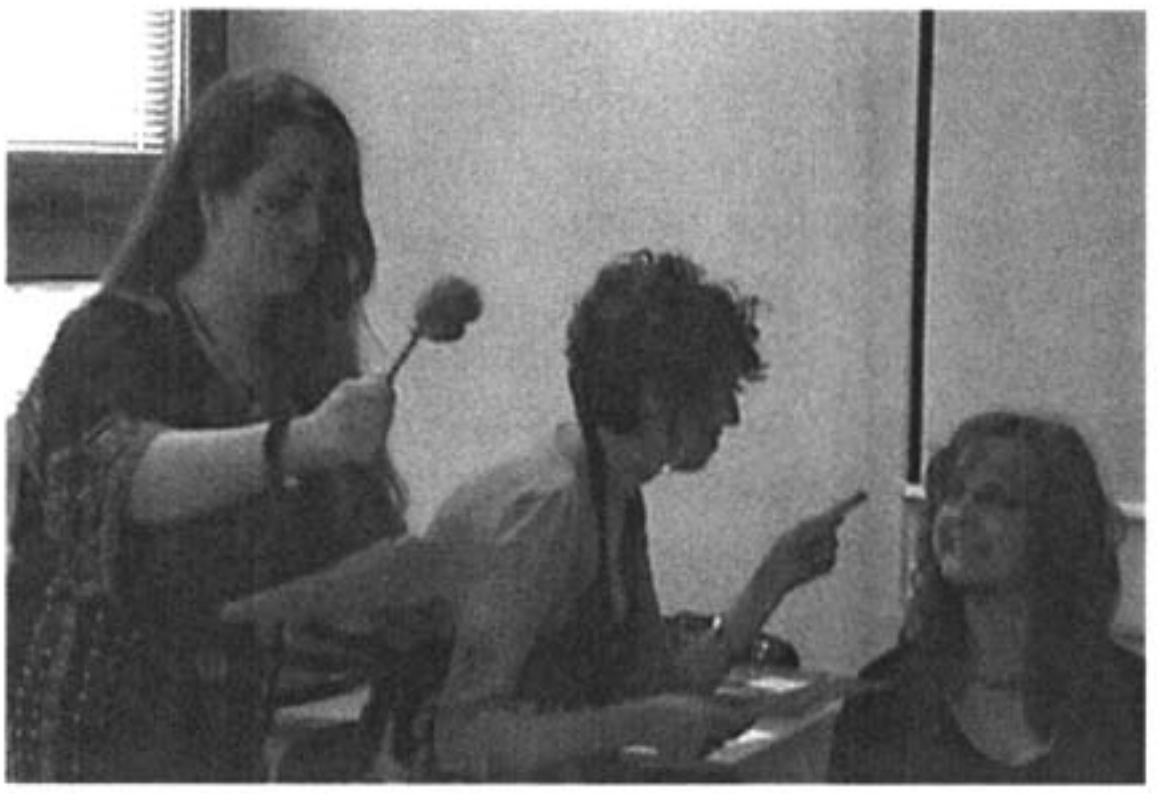

Photo 3: "You'd better not pretend to like Zuma, when you DON'T!"

4.2.2 Jacob Zuma

The second *isibongo* is devoted to perhaps the most controversial and well-known figure of the South African political scene – President Jacob Zuma. It was written by Natalia and Marcelina who took a step further away from their "Polishness" and jumped in at the deep end into the praise poem form. In consequence, on the structural/lexical level there are metaphors, parallelisms, rhyming, repetitive structures and impressive (though not unchallenged) representations of the leader. In the performative part, body language (waving, stomping), "magical shower of words" (the solemn recitation often changes into frantically rapid, broken utterances with varied pitch and volume) and even mediation between the living and the ancestors with the help of a magical artefact, a doll's dishevelled head on a stick. The above-mentioned elements, both structural and performative, constitute the political art of praising according to Kresse (1998: 174-178).

The poem is, however, not entirely devoid of elements coming directly from the girls' own cultural frame of reference. The opening line contains a reference to *Heart of Darkness*, a novella written by Joseph Conrad, a Polish-born British writer. Among the repetitive verses is a line from Bob Marley's song Iron, Lion, Zion and a chorus from Here Comes the Rain Again by Eurhythmics. A reference to Jesus (again the Polish catholic upbringing) is even slipped into one of the remarks suggesting that Zuma bears resemblance to the Saviour. In fact, what happens here is that the

students use images and songs well known to them and, by free association, spontaneously combine them with stereotypical representations of Africa and some of the rules imposed by the form of a praise poem. The ease with which they mix elements from the two cultures suggests that the girls feel quite comfortable with both and see no reason to draw a clear dividing line between the Domestic and the Exotic.

Natalia:	In the heart of darkness.
Marcelina:	In the heart of darkness!
Natalia:	Because he was born in a very poor family and his father died in WWII.
Marcelina:	In the heart of blackness
Natalia:	as he was born in Nkandla in KwaZulu Natal
Marcelina:	Ngeke ngithule umuntu engigedla engihlekisa
Natalia:	You'd better not pretend to like Zuma, when you DON'T!
Natalia:	Gedleyihlekisa is iron
Together singing:	Iron like a lion in Zion.
…	
Natalia:	… like a lion in Zion – he came
Marcelina:	He came like Jesus!
…	
Marcelina:	He loves family – a family man! A traditional one!
Natalia:	He loves family so much
Marcelina:	that he has five wives!
Natalia:	three fiancées!
Marcelina:	eighteen children!
Natalia:	He is a good man!
Marcelina:	A clean man!
Natalia:	He likes to take a shower!
Marcelina:	A wash a day
Natalia:	keeps AIDS away!
…	
Natalia:	And ancestors? What do ancestors say?
Marcelina:	Political ancestors!
Natalia:	Madiba says:
Marcelina:	He is good!
…	
Marcelina:	And that the ancestors said
Natalia:	they said, they talked to us
…	
Natalia:	To you, all South Africans!
Marcelina:	Together we can do more!
Natalia:	The greatest President of the Republic of South Africa!
Together:	Msholozi!

4.2.3 Terror Lekota

The final poem exhibits the fewest traces of Polish culture. In this case, the students seem to have wanted to be, look and sound as "African" as possible. What does that mean? And how did they try to achieve that?

Both girls, never having been to Africa to witness a traditional performance, let alone an *isibongo* presentation, had to rely on their resourcefulness and imagination alone to create an encounter that is unquestionably beyond the scope of their own experience.

Photo 4: "You. You! Sing."

So they turned to the available cultural stereotypes, mostly concerning external forms of expression – long colourful robes, dangling earrings, elaborate headgear, trance dancing, haunting singing, uncanny murmuring and frenzied rattling.

Another way in which the students tried to further accentuate the authenticity of the "exotic experience" was to follow the provided guidelines for writing an *isibongo* as closely as possible. Their efforts resulted in a fairly adequate and reasonable representation of the chosen political figure with references to both his past misfortunes and his achievements. There is not a single allusion to their own culture or beliefs. The story they told through their poem was truly a story of a South African political leader told from the perspective of people who love and believe in him. The poem was solemnly recited by one of the students, who adjusted the speed and volume of her recitation to give extra emphasis to particular lines, and who kept the audience under control by manifesting that whatever was taking place there was of extreme importance (presumably to the whole nation). At the same time, the other student chanted mysterious tribal incantations over the alternatively escalating and faltering background noise made by a rattle.

The girls managed to take on whole new personae in order for this experience to be as powerful or "meaningful" as possible (Beard & Wilson 2006: 20). Even the way they spoke was closer to South African English

that they learned in one of the classes than to the standard British English they are taught in the programme. The "domestic" elements in this performance – stereotypical interpretation – are rather underplayed. This is to say that the focus is on how "African" the performance sounded and looked and not on the fact that this "African" imagery was, at that point, merely a product of the preformed (mis)conceptions that the students brought with them to the classroom.

Zuza (pointing to the audience):
You! You!
(pointing to Wiktoria)
You sing.
Zuza: Music.
Wiktoria: *[humming and rattling throughout the chant]*
Zuza: This is the Song of Terror.
In darkest times of Apartheid,
One man stood to put it right.
In times of terror, Terror, he came,
He fought for freedom, he earned the fame.
…
Zuza: *[making a gesture with her hand to have Wiktoria stop singing, as if signalling that something of great importance is about to be said]*
As he predicted, the victory was near,
The long-awaited joy again arrived here.
He served for the ANC for very long time;
He stood by Madiba to beat the crime,
Wiktoria: Crime!
Zuza: He stood by Mbeki, for safety he cared,
Wiktoria: Cared!
Zuza: And when the doubts came, to stand up he dared.
Wiktoria: Dared!
Zuza: Though friends decided to step aside,
Though they accused him of that he lied,
He did not resign to bring the hope,
(standing up) He rose again he formed the COPE.
Wiktoria: COPE!
Zuza: He fights unemployment, he improves education,
He brings development and job satisfaction,
Wiktoria: Satisfaction!
Zuza: He ends the racism, he ends the crime,
Wiktoria: Crime!
Zuza: He leads Africa for glory to climb.
Terrific Terror is still in the game,
A spark of hope that burns like a flame!
Wiktoria (with a curtsy):
Flame!

In conclusion, it has to be mentioned that the three examples above exhibited different degrees of acculturation. In the first one, there was a clear distinction between what is regarded as "Polish" and what as "African". The students used tools they were familiar with – the structure and melody of a psalm – to create an unfamiliar form of verbal expression. In the second poem, the line between self and other was blurred and the cultural code-switching was employed not so much to mark the students' own cultural roots but rather to serve a flow-enhancing purpose, or it was even a kind of comic relief. Finally, in the third *isibongo*, there are no hints of Polish/European culture whatsoever, at least on the surface level. It is clear though, that the students, who had no first-hand experience of Africa, had to resort to the existing stereotypes about traditional South African performances. A quote from McDrury and Alterio (2003: 36), who wrote about using storytelling in higher education, would be a perfect way to conclude this part: "[t]he ability to accommodate different perspectives, along with ongoing transcultural usage, suggests that storytelling is a learning tool which can transcend cultural differences".

There would, however, have been no accommodating of the different perspectives or transcending cultural differences if the students had not, by means of reflection, transferred their intuitive performance somewhere where it would be more easily accessible to reason and critical thinking. As Mendelowitz and Ferreira (2007: 489) notice, "using narratives … has significance … for setting up a learning environment where knowledge is seen as *partial*, *provisional* and *open to interpretation*" (2007: 489; our italics). The realisation, both for the teacher and the student, that performing/experiencing a narrative on its own is not a done deal proved to be crucial in the reflection stage of the learning process. In the case of praise poems, reflection did not take place immediately after the students' performances but a little later on, which gave them more perspective and the lecturer time to reflect on how to address the different stereotypical representations apparent from the students' performances. The danger that, if unchallenged, certain thought patterns might prevail and lead to biased expectations is always present in a cross-cultural classroom and one makes it a rule to invariably encourage the students to question their habitual thinking. The reflection sessions were accompanied by additional reading material to help the students rectify the misunderstandings and consolidate what they have learned.

5 Conclusion

In the most general terms, this article examined the issue of cross-cultural communication; communication between the students and the object of their studies. The students' search for a middle course to accommodate "the Domestic" and "the Exotic" within their classroom experience was

discussed together with the teachers' quest for a way to build bridges between two countries on two different continents through the medium of experiential learning. That these bridges can be built with storytelling and role-play was proved in the third section of this article which contains a description of how the theories examined in the first parts of the article can be put into practice. By using the existing material and resources in an innovative manner we unlocked the experiential potential of the classroom in such a manner that the Polish students became not only recipients of but also active contributors to the teaching/learning processes. They experienced a part of South African reality from different angles – as actors and playwrights of the Afrikaans soapies they covered in their language classes, and as poets and performers in their culture classes. By taking upon themselves the role of *izimbongo*, the praise poets, they also accepted their responsibility to voice the general opinion of "the people". They learned not only about the concept of praise poetry as such, but also about the objects of their poems – the different political leaders of South Africa. In this way they did significantly more than just intellectually classifying the provided information. They also gave meaning to it in the course of the whole process and through these experiences and accompanying emotions they could personalise and transform their existing knowledge about South Africa into something rich and very much alive.

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Jagoda Szulia & Karien Brits
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań (Poland)
jagodas@ifa.amu.edu.pl & karien.brits@nwu.ac.za