

MOVING WITH EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE BETWEEN AND WITHIN CULTURES

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ABSTRACT:

Having an ‘emotional passport’ means acquiring skills to regulate intense emotional challenges experienced in cultural transitions. This paper addresses ways to help young travelers become more resilient problem solvers, better at tolerating ambiguity, and more competent with cultural difference. It points out how the intercultural field misses opportunities to prepare learners for the emotional highs and lows of cultural exchange, relying instead on language of catastrophe (“culture shock”) and crisis preparation. We can, instead, teach strategies to help regulate the normal stressors that come with crossing cultures. Crisis planning alone does not meet the psychological needs of most sojourners. I encourage a shift in language and practice from “culture shock” to “culture shift,” by outlining how our brains process and integrate new information, and I describe life stage issues facing young adults, demonstrating how these challenges interface with emotional competencies necessary for crossing cultures.

Introduction

Edward T. Hall, anthropologist and founding-father of intercultural communication, writes that the Tewa tribe of New Mexico used the same word for ‘learning’ as for ‘breathing’. (Hall, 1991) This is remarkable, for today we know that our best learning requires the capacity to slow our breathing in order to calmly attend, focus, and integrate information. Best “learners”, or best problem solvers, could be described as those who have a capacity for emotional resilience, a capacity I call “the emotional passport.” I believe that the resilience necessary for positive intercultural exchanges involves important psychological variables that are often overlooked by students, faculty, and host families.

The “emotional passport” is a dynamic toolbox of skills learned and practiced during the full-circle of intercultural exchange: pre-departure, on site, and re-entry. Those who carry an emotional passport recognize that moving between cultures can contribute to high emotional arousal (discomfort, irritability, anger, homesickness, sadness) and understand that disengaging from emotional overload to quiet the mind will contribute to improved focus. In fact, ambiguity tolerance, a skill most noted as a building block for mastering intercultural transitions, is at the core of the emotional passport. The capacity to calm down -- self-regulate -- in the face of strong reactions to uncomfortable or perhaps even disturbing events is a dynamic process. Sitting with negative thoughts and feelings, perhaps feelings of discomfort in the face of “difference,” and embracing multiple points of view is not easily developed. As providers, we can ensure that our young sojourners acquire healthy strategies to understand and regulate intense emotional experiences.

This paper challenges the intercultural field’s reliance on the language and concept of the term “culture shock.” Cultural transitions are often a part of learning and maturing, of becoming effective global citizens. To be able to seize opportunities when crossing cultures requires a toolbox of healthy strategies acquired as part of the emotional passport. The culture shock vocabulary, which in itself imagines overwhelming stress as something students and faculty should expect, is not a healthy model. The ability to tolerate normal mood shifts that can arise when making a move into a different culture requires adult support. Without it, our students’ experiences can be derailed from the beginning. Emotional roadblocks, such as the inability to regulate emotional highs and lows, can contribute to poor rather than successful outcomes. Crossing and integrating cultures is a process, and like breathing, not a single event.

We know that in the intercultural adjustment process, a student can shift from periods of curiosity and enthusiasm to periods of withdrawal, self-doubt, and sometimes self-destructive behaviors such as compulsive eating, drinking, and/or drug use. Helping students and faculty understand the context of these low periods, and offering tools to self-regulate the normal intense emotions that come from cultural transitions are key to students becoming invested learners. In this essay, I share my thoughts about how a mental health or wellness perspective can contribute to students becoming better learners, and programs becoming more able to facilitate healthy intercultural transitions.

Interculturalists and mental health professionals have some important things in common. We share a curiosity about the ways people organize their experiences...we want to understand how we make meaning from our lives. I believe that it's our job to help young adults sharpen their lenses to better interpret and make meaning of intercultural contexts. This involves helping them understand the meanings behind the high levels of emotional arousal (varied moods) that tend to accompany intercultural exchanges -- all steps toward a healthier, more flexible adulthood

Crisis (Medical) Lens to the Wellness Lens

The long-held idea that culture shock is an inevitable part of the cross-cultural journey is challenged by Colleen Ward's important contribution. She describes the history linking immigration into the US and assumptions about mental illness. In the early 20th C., twenty-percent of the US population were immigrants, yet 70% of the population in mental institutions were immigrants. The assumptions were that either dysfunctional people were likely to emigrate, or that intercultural contact itself produced mental illness. (Ward 2004 p.33-36).

By the 1980s, Ward relates, with better research, there was a move away from a medical model, towards an understanding that education in culture learning and coping skills could alleviate stress reactions. The intercultural journey began to be seen as an "ongoing, dynamic experience, not just for the traveling student, but also for the host culture." The emphasis began to focus on adaptation and active coping strategies in a process that "occurs over time." (Ward, 2003, p.36) This has been a healthier model.

Yet, the "shock" word and crisis focus prevails in study abroad materials, and programs continue to use catastrophe "shock" language. From a 21st C. mental health point of view, "shock"

is not a normal emotional state, and the use of language that predicts catastrophe sets up students, advisors, and host families for problems. What's communicated with "shock" language is that the expression of intense feelings can be serious or abnormal, and yet intense emotions (verbally or non-verbally) are commonly part of transitions. The process of growth and change, which is built into international exchanges, demands emotional adjustments which rarely are without challenges, but also rarely shocking or catastrophic.

The mental health focus for international exchange, often centered on safety and crisis, makes clinical sense. But such focus reflects a small portion of what the mental health contribution could be for the field. The crisis message is: *Be prepared for those very few who might develop a psychiatric disorder.* The field's standard of attending to the mental health of students seems to be "no problem unless a crisis problem," becoming a "911" approach, not a message of prevention. This deficit can leave students more symptomatic and at risk than need be. It's one thing to offer sound intellectual challenges, but without the integration of emotional support and academics, programs become vulnerable to derailing their goals. A crisis lens alone is a 20th C. way of looking at human beings as "troubled creatures in need of repair." (Lambert, 2007).

Continuing the use of culture shock vocabulary reveals how negative language can inhibit healthy support for our students. Many exchange programs still present the Culture Shock model of 4 stages, or the U-curve. The first two stages of Euphoria and Irritability/Hostility describe intense emotions: "Euphoria", on arrival, the part students have anticipated, and "Irritability and hostility," when students later discover that initial positive energy has turned negative. *The research shows, however, that many students do not necessarily feel euphoric in the initial weeks – in fact, many students feel confused and disoriented, (Ward, 2003),* but varied and intense mood reactions overall are what's important.

Words such as "shock" and "hostility" portray a dire situation, and expectations for "shock" can become behaviors experienced as emergencies. Shock is not healthy and should not be called normal.

Even though the field has developed alternative ways to understand and support students (e.g. J.Bennett, 1998), the crisis model prevails. *It becomes easy to dismiss a student as "just having culture shock,"* and miss opportunities for healthy intervention. An awareness of strategies to handle stress reactions has not often translated into practice. The phrase "mental health" itself

continues to conjure up for many providers images of depressed or ill people, and these misperceptions end up contributing to poor service. Since there is rarely training for prevention, or the active inclusion of mental health professionals in intercultural exchanges, it has been easy to relegate “emotional” challenges to crisis interventions.

Moving from Symptoms to Signals

There’s a more useful lens from which to describe the emotional transition process. Instead of shock “symptoms,” I suggest we re-label the clinical language and call stressed behaviors *signals* – to alert us (the adults, support system) that a student has been impacted by the host culture and the loss, even temporarily, of home. Moving away from the language and expectation of “shock,” we can better focus our lens on noticing, even expecting, mood shifts as a starting point for responding. Reframing “irritability and hostility” as not “just part of a phase” reminds us that strong emotions might come and go throughout the journey, and that these feelings can be a normal part of the emotional transition.

Here are typical behaviors that can get the attention of faculty, host families, and Resident Directors: *homesickness, boredom, withdrawal, need for excessive amounts of sleep, compulsive eating or drinking, stereotyping local people, reduced ability to work effectively, physical ailments* These **signals**, not symptoms, are not an endpoint. They are *clues* that a student is on overload and needs to pull back and re-balance. *In fact, any of these behaviors can signal that a student has been impacted by changing cultures.*

Keep in mind that initially one may not know the meaning of signal behaviors – early intervention requires knowing your students well. When in doubt, seek consultation from a licensed mental health professional and a medical doctor.

Stress and coping / a wellness model provides a more normal frame of reference.

Here are some examples of normal experiences which illustrate some challenges for the intercultural field.

- I recently got an email forwarded from a friend’s daughter Stephanie who’s studying in

Prague for the year. She's been away for 3 months and wrote home expressing doubts about her decision to study abroad. Stephanie feared speaking with peers or advisors about her boredom, loneliness, and confusion, worried that it would "break a rule," or appear weak to admit that she was unhappy. And, she felt her academic work had been negatively impacted by the emotional burden. Unfortunately, she assumed little tolerance from staff for her low moods. *Just toughing it out, even if one is miserable, seems a poor policy.*

- In my interviews with American faculty who lead overseas programs, it is not uncommon to hear the following phrases describing some of their students:
"...having a hard time of it", "sheltered and tentative", "intimidated by new experiences", "unprepared for things that aren't comfortable", "self-medicating with alcohol", "entitled and not hardy". *In general, these are "normal" students who come to programs with no diagnoses or medications, young adults with little practice in self-care around emotional arousal. Faculty do not feel prepared to help students regulate emotional intensity, often finding themselves angry at students who do not "behave."*

New learning, especially the overload brought with crossing cultures, can bring exhaustion and negative moods. A healthier model would include attention to supporting skills for emotional regulation. It is not easy to acquire an "emotional passport". In fact, as Milton Bennett writes,

"Intercultural sensitivity is not natural. It is not part of our primate past, nor has it characterized most of human history. Cross-cultural contact usually has been accompanied by bloodshed, oppression, or genocide."
(M. Bennett, 1993, p.21)

Part of the training for intercultural sensitivity must go beyond cognitive and behavioral information transfer. Becoming better skilled to expect and regulate emotional overload can add enormous benefit to students' mastery of "difference". First, they can learn to identify and anticipate feelings or "signals" of discomfort when exposed to new challenges. It is a skill to acknowledge that one feels uncomfortable, and it takes practice to calm intense emotional responses that are elicited when one feels separated from the usual comfort zones. Typically, people will choose to dismiss, deny, or over react to feeling aroused. (And lack of awareness and skills can lead teens and young adults to manifest those "signals" that have so often been attributed to "culture shock".)

I believe that the intercultural field will be strengthened by incorporating skills to address

the mental health needs of what we could call the “normal” study abroad student, those who might have extended homesickness, those who are away from family and friends for the first time, those who were used to every success and melt down because they cannot ask for help, or those who annoy staff by seeking a high quantity of attention (and just might be anxious).

Another layer -- How adolescence and young adulthood impact the acquisition of the Emotional Passport.

Keep in mind that there are specific and complicating *layers of emotional challenges* for the college and high school population, more so than with sojourners of other age groups. In general, students from ages 17 – 23 are in a vulnerable period in human development. The psychosocial tasks of this life stage, consolidating one’s identity and exploring relationships, can contribute to seeking out the kinds of opportunities international exchange programs offer. Students might choose to study in a new culture because they are eager to explore ways to sort out who they are and what they want to become, and in this process of exploration, at least for Western students, there can be emotional ground swells: normal mood swings, challenges to authority, changing one’s mind or relationships, becoming “someone else”.

With identity development come questions about one’s own culture, or decisions to dismiss rules set by those representing “new parents” abroad. Questioning one’s role in one’s home community can be transferred to doubts about “belonging” in the host community. There are often many transitions into and out of groups and relationships. As a normal period of experimentation, of practice, trial and error, a life stage transition becomes layered and interfaced with a cultural transition. In addition, faculty are often at mid-life, possibly experiencing their own re-assessment of life choices.

So, the normal young student embarking on an intercultural journey experiences age-appropriate challenges layered with the expected intense emotional arousal that comes with facing and feeling “difference.” Because there are so many uncertainties in cultural transitions, a certain amount of anxiety would be expected. For example, exposure to so many new experiences requires maintaining a high level of alertness. So, the initial discomfort or confusion might signal the beginning of settling in. Your body is putting you on notice that you have arrived! In order to keep an open mind, be flexible and curious, and have tolerance for differences, students must learn that regulating high arousal, the practice of getting comfortable with change, is part of self-care. Adult support is critical, so that a student’s highs and lows will not contribute to derailing positive goals.

Unregulated stress can overload our capacity to think clearly and make good decisions. Part of anticipating challenges requires the use of strategies for self-care.

What is behind the variety of stress “signals” that contribute to the process of transition? Research in neuroscience offers guidance to the intercultural field. By attending to the way the human brain processes intense emotions, we can support our students’ process from an informed and helpful position. (e.g. Siegel, 2001)

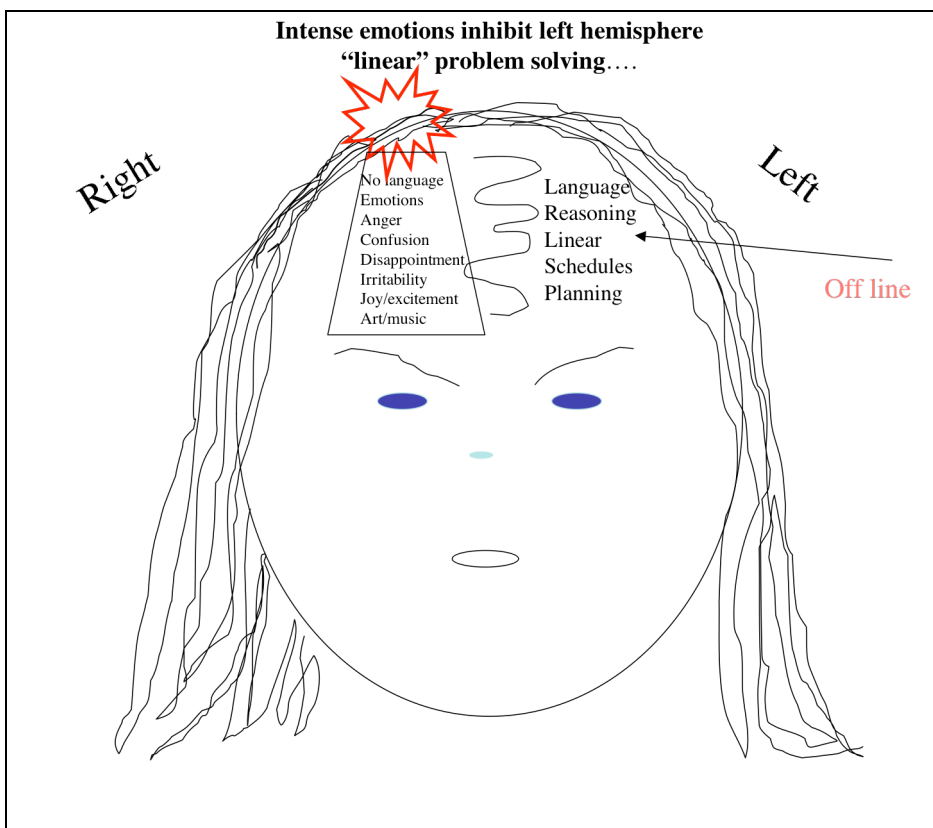
The human brain operates a bit like a battery through an oscillation of energy – energy spent and energy renewed. We *consume* energy during periods of activity or concentration and *renew* energy in periods of quiet or disengagement. This cycle is essential to the process of learning. As psychologist Jim Loehr (2003) writes, maximum performance requires periods of emotional disengagement. After a period of concentration, the brain needs to recover, and then another focused period can begin. As result of intense and new learning experiences, fatigue sends our body signals to disengage. If we ignore the need to re-fuel, behaviors that have been called “culture shock” can follow, eg irritability, withdrawal, hostility. Fatigue from high arousal has consequences, contributing to difficulty concentrating and decreased performance.

Our American culture works against promoting the stress and recovery cycle because we encourage little practice with self-regulation. Taking time out is seen as a weakness. Understanding that best performances come with *the practice of disengaging from high arousal, programs can better serve their student population by integrating wellness practices into program planning.*

For our young travelers, the excitement at each stage of pre-departure, arrival, and re-entry uses high levels of energy. With so many uncertainties in transitions, maintaining a high level of focus is necessary, yet difficult. To maximize learning, stress and recovery must be balanced. A significant goal for cultural transition, then, is managing energy not time. (Loehr, 2003) Ask yourselves and your students: how are you spending your energy? *The focus for providers should be emotional regulation – not to send an alarm of “shock.” Young people need our support to value and acquire skills for self-regulation.*

So, the context of intense arousal is linked to exhaustion and failure to disengage. Providers can help students soften the highs and lows, supporting a more gradual adjustment. We must watch for the early warning signals, then support a variety of disengagement strategies – individualized and integrated into programming. Without adult support, students might disengage “without permission”, seeking out self-destructive behaviors that can derail their goals and the program’s success. Calming down, we feel more in control, more able to make informed choices, and more ready to take in the rich culture learning available to us. A quieter mind promotes the capacity to tolerate discomfort, uncertainty, and ambiguity, leading to better problem solving and greater potential for intercultural sensitivity.

The ‘Aroused Brain’ and Wellness Practices



Let’s go back to Stephanie, our student in Prague. Generally, she’s a good problem solver, planner, optimistic, and tolerant, but today, three months into her year abroad, she’s feeling fatigued, irritable, confused, and worried. Negative emotions are clouding her thoughts. This is what is happening:

we know that with high

*levels of arousal, the language/problem solving center of the brain’s left hemisphere goes “off line”, and the right hemisphere, the seat of emotional expression, without language, takes over.*¹

Feeling upset, Stephanie has little capacity to make good choices. For her, the signals to disengage are sounding. She needs time out to reduce her anxiety, quiet her mind, and get back on track. It’s not a good learning day for her! Remember, her capacity to be fully engaged depends on her ability to periodically disengage. (Loehr, 2003, p. 38 and 97) Adult support is essential. She must trust that

seeking help for emotional overload is expected, normal, and easy to come by. Adult providers need to demonstrate preventive interventions, not dismiss Stephanie “having culture shock.” Growth and development requires facing and solving problems – building skill sets. There are opportunities here for Stephanie and the adults around her. With practice respecting her oscillating energy, her highs will be more moderate and her lows not so deep.

Opportunities with Disengagement

There are opportunities when worries emerge. How does disengagement work? How does one refuel? What are some ways to self-regulate those normal intense emotions that come with cultural transitions?

If self-calming provides the space to problem solve, then our toolbox should contain a variety of ways to meet students’ needs. Think of the opportunities as building a scaffolding, because the capacity to self-observe and reflect comes with practice. Be sure to practice at pre-departure, reinforce and add to the toolbox on site, and review again at re-entry. Skills need to be rehearsed along the way so that one feels more in control when those out-of-energy and anxious moments arise.

There are many ways to harness wellness practices to support positive moods and focused learning. I usually start with encouraging breathing practices (what the Tewa tribe knew long ago about learning). Deep breathing slows the heart rate and lowers blood pressure, both of which can be elevated if the body feels “danger” in the face of “difference”. Fatigue can exacerbate a sense of helplessness. The sympathetic nervous system is triggered quickly, like a light switch, as the fight or flight response. The counterbalance to escalation, the parasympathetic response, is slower in coming. We can quickly lose our capacity to think clearly, and regaining our thinking cap takes time. Sitting quietly, closing one’s eyes, and taking in deep belly breath takes practice. Encourage students and staff to practice this simple skill along the way, so that it’s easily accessed when needed.

Here are some other ideas to facilitate disengagement from high arousal. Develop your own toolbox and practice.

- Create periods when cell phones, computers, and other electronics are off limits.
- Support healthy eating, minimizing high sugar intake.

- Mindful awareness: through breathing, shift attention to the present. This increases capacity for self-soothing. If you are present in the moment, you are not worrying and feel less helpless.
- Exercise moderates the impact of high arousal, but be sure to include additional strategies to supplement your toolbox.
- Yoga: a nice complement to aerobic exercise
- Tree-forest images: practice stepping back and taking stock of the moment.
- Half-smile. Try it!
- Change the Channel: Visualize a set of images ahead of time so that they are a resource, eg. Channel 8 could be the immediate imagined catastrophe, and Channel 4 (pre-selected) is “you” sitting on your porch at home watching the sunset.
- Dial Down: put your fist on your forehead and “dial” down your high intensity to a lower level. This is a re-set to a quieter place and provides a pause to begin clearer thinking.
- The Arts: use a variety of possibilities around the arts: music, painting, dance, singing, poetry, pottery, all provide respite from high arousal.

The capacity to calm down —self-regulate--in the face of strong reactions to uncomfortable or even disturbing events is a dynamic process. With a refueled brain, there is more energy to sit with negative thoughts and feelings. Calmer, one can then begin to put things into perspective and embrace multiple points of view and alternative interpretations. Working with this process is part of what we can offer our young sojourners.

Conclusion

When students arrive, we’d like them to have ‘packed’ their ‘best brains.’ We can help them build in rest cycles to maximize their intercultural experience. We can guide them to recognize uncomfortable feelings which might emerge in the face of “difference,” and we can teach them strategies to support a readiness to become more sensitive to intercultural challenges. We have a responsibility to be aware that emotional highs and lows *will* be a part of the intercultural journey and to help our students trust that the adults around them *will* welcome conversations about the emotional passport.

End note: 1. The brain’s left-right division, for the purposes of this discussion, are schematic. Van der Kolk’s (1996) work with trauma patients revealing brain functioning under stress has been adapted in this article. This is not to infer that our students are experiencing trauma, but to link ideas about high emotional

arousal with the impact on language. “When people are frightened or aroused, the frontal areas of the brain, which analyze an experience and associate it with other knowledge, are deactivated. ...At the same time, high levels of arousal interfere with the adequate functioning of the brain region necessary to put one’s feelings into words: Broca’s area. Traumatized people suffer speechless terror.” Quoted from <http://www.dana.org/news/cerebrum/detail.aspx?id=1490>

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Biography

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