Bennett, M. (2010). Creating an interculturally competent campus to educate global citizens.. Proceedings of the Universidad 2010 7th International Congress on Higher Education, The University for a Better World, Feb. 10, 2010, Havana, Cuba.

CREATING AN INTERCULTURALLY COMPETENT CAMPUS TO EDUCATE GLOBAL CITIZENS

Paper presented to the
Universidad 2010 7th International Congress on Higher Education
The University for a Better World
February 8th to 12th 2010
Palacio de Convenciones
Havana, Cuba

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ABSTRACT

Liberal arts education has traditionally taken the responsibility of preparing students to be intellectually competent and ethical citizens of society. But now society has evolved into "global villages" where people of different national and ethnic heritage increasingly live side by side in real and virtual environments. Does this kind of post-modern society demand new intellectual and ethical competencies? If so, what is the responsibility and capability of liberal arts education to teach those competencies? This paper explores how the field of intercultural relations can help address issues of intercultural competence and social justice in intellectually coherent and organizationally practical ways. The paper also address applications of intercultural principles to a wide range of curriculum issues, such as the use of intercultural communication frameworks in the classroom, strategies for encouraging intercultural learning through campus, community, and study abroad activities, and faculty development.

KEYWORDS

Intercultural competence; intercultural relations, multicultural education; intercultural diversity; intercultural ethics; developmental model of intercultural sensitivity

INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that *intercultural competence* is a crucial element of higher education, particularly when the educational enterprise purports to nurture ethical behavior and good citizenship. Intercultural competence refers to the ability to deal effectively with cross-cultural contexts, including the identification of relevant cultural differences, predicting misunderstanding due to those differences, and generating

appropriate adaptation strategies based on perspective-taking and code-shifting (M. Bennett, 2010).

There are three major areas in which intercultural competence contributes to this kind of a better world:

1. **At the most basic level, intercultural competence increases the effectiveness of communication in classrooms and on the campus.** Most universities these days are multicultural, with students and faculty who represent different national societies, ethnic groups, regions, social classes, sexual orientations, and other differences. Effective learning in multicultural contexts is dependent on adaptation to cultural differences, since education is a highly culturally contexted process.

   Typically, it is non-dominant students who bear the brunt of adaptation, trying through trial and error or informal information to get along in the dominant culture. Professors of the dominant culture are often complicit in this one-directional adaptation, taking the position that foreign or minority students have the obligation to get along with them, not the other way around.

   Intercultural competence implies two-way cultural adaptation, where it is jointly the responsibility of the host and the guest, or the dominant and the non-dominant culture members, to adapt to one another. With such mutual adaptation, professors are able to teach effectively to a broader range of students, and the students are able to learn more effectively from a broader range of teaching styles and educational contexts.

2. **Intercultural competence is both the method and the desired outcome of intercultural learning.** Insofar as the university seeks to imbue students with the competence to deal with cultures other than their own, they need to teach intercultural competence. But to teach the competence, faculty need themselves to be competent and to exercise that competence in their teaching. In other words, ethnocentric faculty cannot model or teach intercultural competence any more than illiterate people can practice literary criticism. This does not mean that such people are deficient in general – only that they are not qualified to engage in these particular activities.

   The implication of this observation is that university faculty need to themselves develop intercultural sensitivity to be part of any intercultural competence program.

3. **Intercultural competence expresses the essence of social justice: equal humanity.** Social equity is served by assuming the equal complexity but essentially different experience of all human beings. If our concern is with inter-group relations (as opposed to only interpersonal relations), then it is important to describe the normative behavior of people according to broadly-defined groups (subjective culture) and for people to identify with one or more of these groups. Then inter-group relations are served by improving intercultural communication –

identifying relevant cultural differences and predicting potential misunderstanding.

The avoidance of abuses of power in cross-cultural situations is served by mutual adaptation. The dominance of one culture over another is supported by accepting that cultural adaptation is a one-way process that should be engaged in by whomever is the minority – guests, immigrants, etc. But when people of different cultures equally attempt to adapt to one another, they generate *virtual third cultures* that allow constructive communication to occur (M. Bennett, 2007).

To achieve these benefits of intercultural competence, universities need to link targeted developmental programs for faculty and students to the traditional aims of liberal arts universities. The following sections define this process in more detail.

LINKING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE TO TRADITIONAL LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

What makes higher education "liberal" is its acknowledgement of multiple perspectives. Unlike "illiberal" education such a fundamentalist religious or political training, liberal education seeks diversity of perspective and relativity of truth. It assumes that in their exploration of multiple perspectives, students will create their own syntheses of perspective to guide them in their personal and professional endeavors. By encouraging the clash of truths, students will become critical and self-reflective, and thus they will become develop consciousness and ethical commitment.

Of course, the ideal of liberal education is seldom completely achieved. But it is important to remember the ideal, since it is constantly under attack by the illiberal forces of religious fundamentalism, political extremism, and other parochialism. Traditionally, liberal education has pursued its goal in the following manners:

1. **The emphasis on multiple disciplinary perspectives**. Liberal arts students are encouraged to explore a variety of disciplines as part of their undergraduate education. Most curricula have some kind of distribution requirement to ensure that students are at least exposed to some physical science, some social science, and some humanities. Ideally, with these perspectives students will be able to look at the world is more varied and complex ways; for instance, being able to understand the geology of a seismic event, being able to understand the study of demographic changes that might have been caused by the event, and then also being able to appreciate the profound individual stories of people who experienced the event. In the end, it is hoped that an educated person will be able to fashion a unique synthesis of knowledge based on these disciplinary perspectives and him or herself become a creative force in global citizenship.

   The development of intercultural competence parallels the development of interdisciplinary competence. Just as liberal thinking demands that students transcend the parochialism of a single disciplinary perspective, it also demands that students transcend the ethnocentrism of a single cultural perspective. To be good global citizens, they must recognize a range of ways that human beings

have organized reality and appreciate the influence such worldviews have on how people act – including themselves.

2. **The emphasis on critical thinking.** One of the main goals of liberal education is for graduates to be able to think critically. By this, what is generally meant is that students should be able to recognize the contexts in which things occur – things such as news reports, advertisements, films and novels, and political events. Further, they should be able to recognize their own context in terms of socio-economic class, personality, etc. – that is, to be self-aware. With the combination of self-awareness and other contextual awareness, students should then be able to make a critical judgment about the appropriateness of a claim. For instance, if students are asked to protest against a political view, they should be able to assess 1) who is encouraging the protest and why might they be doing that? 2) what is the perspective of the target of the protest? 3) how might the appeal be playing on one's own biases and prejudices? Based on these and other critical observations, the student is (ideally) able to make an informed judgment about what action to take.

   The development of intercultural competence parallels the development of critical thinking by adding the idea of cultural worldview to the general idea of "context." By being aware of one's own culture (cultural self-awareness) and that of other people in a situation, one is better able to understand why people are acting as they are, and how one might best respond. For instance, if a person from a highly individualistic culture is encouraging a person from a more collectivist culture to just "be himself" and pursue his own personal goals at the expense of a group goal, to what extent is that advice appropriate? Is the advisor aware of her own cultural context? Is not, is she not engaging in a kind of cultural imperialism, assuming the inherent goodness of her own way of being over all others in the world? Or if the advice-giver is indeed aware of the differences in cultural values, is she making an informed choice about the effect of the advice in a different cultural context? Similarly, is the advice receiver aware of the cultural difference involved in the advice, or does he think that there is some universal standard of personal integrity that he is failing to meet? If he is aware of the difference, how can he respond to the advice in a way that acknowledges the advisor's cultural context without necessarily agreeing with the appropriateness of the advice?

   To be good global citizens, graduates of our universities need to be able to think as critically about culture as they do about other contexts.

3. **The emphasis on ethical action.** Liberal education presumes that students with access to multiple perspectives and the ability to think critically will then make informed, ethical choices about how to behave in the world. In the case of professional behavior, liberal education provides graduates with not only the skills to pursue a career, but the inclination and ability to do so ethically. In William Perry's (1969, 2000) terms, liberal education equips graduates with the ability to transcend the dualism of absolute rights and wrongs and the multiplicity of "anything goes." Instead, according to Perry, students are able to see events relative to context, and, based on that knowledge, to make informed commitments to action.

Intercultural competence is an enactment of liberal thinking, particularly the emphasis on ethical action. It assumes that alternative cultural worldviews exist, each embracing their own definitions of reality and truth. To navigate these relativistic waters, the competent communicator must be able to critically assess how perspectives on matters are embedded in cultural worldviews, and how a choice or synthesis can be made for a particular purpose. This demands the most sophisticated ethical development and empathic ability (M. Bennett & I. Castiglioni, 2004)

ASPECTS OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

There are three major aspects or dimensions of intercultural competence. Often one or more of these aspects are referred to collectively as the *intercultural approach*, both in academic contexts (M. Bennett, 1998) and in popular usage (V. Nicoloulia, 2010). For universities to be interculturally competent, faculty need to understand this approach and the curriculum needs to reflect it with both specific courses in intercultural communication and the inclusion of this perspective in other disciplines.

1. **The definition of subjective culture and cultural identity.**
   First, we must define what *level of analysis* we are using in observing human behavior. Culture refers to a *group level* of analysis, where the concern is with normative patterns of behavior spread throughout some defined group, such as a national society, a region, a gender, etc. By contrast, an *individual level* of analysis refers to individual characteristics and personality. Of course, people's behavior is a product of both individual characteristics and the socialization they received in a group. It is important for intercultural work to not confuse these two levels of analysis.

   The *institutional level* of analysis is frequently conflated with the group cultural level. Such confusion can lead to the reification, or "essentializing," of culture. Institutions such as political and economic structures, architecture, literature, and all those things that are typically described by history can be seen as products of culture; that is, as products of groups of people who are cooperating in various ways to generate those things. The more culture is viewed in terms of artefacts, the more it is reified. Reified culture is called "objective culture." (Berger & Luckmann, 1969)

   But we can also point to the patterns themselves. These are the ways in which people cooperate with one another to generate certain kinds of behaviour. For instance, people cooperate to generate a conversation in which there are some rules about who listens, who talks, how we make eye contact with one another, what kind of reinforcements are given. All of these things are agreements that we have (or that we are creating) about how to have a conversation. The conversation itself is the product of this, but the way in which we are engaged in this conversation is the pattern of behaviour. According to Berger and Luckmann (1969) this is "subjective culture" – the kind of culture that we carry around with us, or the *worldview* that guides our group-related experience of the world.

In all cases, however, we should remember that culture is a way of observing something. Culture is not really a "thing" so much as it is an observational strategy. When we apply that strategy to observing human behaviour, it generates patterns of group behaviour that we call "culture." But the group patterns that we describe are themselves products of our observational strategy.

Cultural identity is the way that we affiliate with particular cultural groups, or sometimes it is the way we are ascribed to groups. For instance, I affiliate with a certain group of US Americans (West Coast liberals, to be exact) with whom I feel comfortable. I can act in relatively unconscious ways and have that behaviour be appropriate in the group. I more or less agree with the values and beliefs of the group, and I recognize the influence of the group on my behaviour both inside and outside the group. I can affiliate with more than one group; for instance, I affiliate with men more than women, and with well-educated people more than with minimally educated people.

One can also be ascribed membership in groups with which one might not feel affiliated. For instance, I may be ascribed membership in the group of " US American white people," a group with which I don't feel much connection. Still, it is important for me to know that I am ascribed that way, since it sets certain expectations that I may need to specifically counteract.

2. Cross-cultural interaction analysis and the identification of potential misunderstanding.

The complexity of cultural diversity seems overwhelming. Even anthropologists are generally expert in no more than one or two cultures other than their own, and it is their life's work. So how can we have general intercultural competence without specific cultural expertise?

It is one of the great strengths of intercultural relations to have addressed this problem. The key is to use a set of *culture-general frameworks.* These frameworks, derived from anthropology, communication, and other fields of study, provide a general set of cultural contrasts that apply to a wide range of cultures (eg. E.T. Hall, 1961). By identifying where one's own and a particular other culture lies on the continua of contrasts, the student can create a broad picture of the other culture and how it differs from his or her own. It is a relatively simple matter to apply the frameworks to all the cultures with which one has contact. In some cases of light contact, there may be no need for more culture-specific information; the culture-general framework will be sufficient to identify and analyze relevant differences.

These culture-general frameworks are also *learning-to-learn* techniques, since they call attention to the areas of difference that are most important to consider when first encountering another culture. By initially identifying general cultural differences, a newcomer to the culture can avoid obvious misunderstandings and move more quickly towards learning relevant culture-specific knowledge. In this

way, the culture-general framework offers an entrée into the culture-specific knowledge that will be necessary to operate effectively over the long run.

Intercultural programming first establishes the existence of culture and then defines frameworks for identifying cultural differences. A typical list of such frameworks would include

- language use (the social context of language, such as ritual greetings)
- nonverbal behavior (eg, variations in gesturing, or eye contact)
- communication style (eg, linear vs. circular, or emotionally restrained vs expressive)
- cognitive style (eg, inductive vs deductive reasoning, or strategic vs tactical planning)
- cultural values (eg, the importance of hierarchically-defined ascribed roles vs egalitarian-defined achieved roles.

In designing such programming, curriculum planners need to resist the call for information about specific cultures, such as a whole program on Peruvian culture. While such programming looks "cultural," it usually doesn't do much to improve intercultural relations. It helps to remember that intercultural always needs to look at some interface between groups, rather than just at the normative behavior of the group itself.

3. Adaptation strategies and the development of intercultural competence.

Mutual adaptation can only occur when people are roughly similar in both their cultural self-awareness and their sensitivity to other cultures. For that reason, intercultural programming needs to proceed in developmental steps. The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) describes the development of an ability to experience cultural difference (M. Bennett, 1986, 1993, 2004; I.Castiglioni, 2005). At one extreme, the most ethnocentric, people can only experience their own culture as the single reality. At the other extreme, the most ethnorelative, people experience their own culture as one among a myriad of possible experiences of reality, and they are adept at shifting their perspective among different experiences. The movement along the continuum moves through the following "stages," or positions. I will describe the positions in the context of education for ethical global citizenship.

Denial. This position at the beginning of ethnocentrism represents the inability to perceive alternatives to one's own cultural reality. It is difficult to recognize the essential humanity of others who are obviously different from one's self, and naïve questions about the other culture may appear disrespectful. In the extreme, power may be used to exploit others without sensitivity to their feelings of degradation.

Ideally, early college provides a rude and exhilarating awakening to the idea that other people are experiencing the world differently than one's self. Programming can facilitate this discovery with relatively non-threatening exhibitions of cultural difference in the context of lots of support for cultural identities.

Defense. Success in moving from Denial generates a protective response. As people of other cultures become more "real," they also become more threatening. Negative

stereotypes of others flourish and one's own group seems clearly superior. People are polarized into "us and them." Power derived from institutional dominance or from non-dominant posturing is used to support segregation.

On campuses, there are continual waves of people at this stage in political confrontation with one another, arguing for separate dormitories and eating facilities, separate programming, and policies that advantage one group over others. Programming should stress commonality: we are all students with a purpose, and human beings with similar feelings.

Defense/Reversal. This is not the necessary next stage, but rather an alternative form of the Defense position. It has traditionally been found in non-dominant groups as internalized oppression, where the dominant group culture is valued more highly than the non-dominant one. When dominant group members discover that their own group is the oppressor ("externalized oppression"), they sometimes switch sides and take on the cause of a non-dominant group with extreme zeal. Internationally, this also may happen when exchange students "go native." In both cases, the adopted group is romanticized, while one's own group is subjected to greater criticism.

Some of the most adamant demanders of social justice on campus may be dominant group members in reversal. They tend not to support programming that equalizes criticism or in other ways describes cultural groups in neutral terms. They, like others in Defense, are polarized into us and them, but now "them" are the good guys. This reversed polarization should not be mistaken for even moderate intercultural sensitivity.

Minimization. The key to resolving the polarization of Defense is to find the similarity between the poles – in other words, to minimize the differences. This is accomplished by looking at the two groups in terms of physical or psychological similarity. For instance, it is certainly true that people from all cultures typically have two arms and need to eat. Or in psychological terms, we probably can observe both introverts and extroverts in all cultures. Yet another way to minimize difference is to assume that a single principle, such as that of a religious, political, or economic ideology, applies to people of all cultures (whether they know it or not). By focusing on such real or assumed similarities, strangers become more familiar and less threatening.

Students who move from Defense and settle into Minimization may feel that they have arrived at an enlightened position. They are likely to label any discussion of cultural difference as stereotyping, or "exotification." Because they think intercultural understanding is based primarily on similarity, they tend to overestimate their sensitivity to people who in fact are quite different from them. At this position, people of the dominant group underestimate their racial and cultural privilege – their exaggerated assumption of similarity leads them to also exaggerate equality of opportunity.

Student affairs officers should be careful in enlisting the aid of students at Minimization for intercultural programming. They are capable of helping people deal with Defense, but without further development themselves, they are not very good at facilitating movement to more ethnorelative positions. Also, people of non-dominant groups may react negatively to the sometimes righteous attestations of sensitivity.

Acceptance. The movement to Acceptance is accomplished by reconciling unity (similarity) and diversity (difference). Cultural difference becomes important again, this time out of curiosity rather than threat. In accepting difference, people acknowledge that people of other cultures, while equally human to themselves, are in fact organizing their experience of reality differently – according to the different assumptions of their culture. The recognition that people are equally complex, but different, is the strongest antidote to bigotry that I know. Bigotry is reduced, not as a case of anti-racism, but as a manifestation of extending the boundary of human similarity and difference to include the strangers.

Acceptance is the minimum goal to which intercultural programming should aspire. However, to accomplish this goal, programming needs to be sequenced developmentally. Unfortunately, this is seldom the case. More common is programming that repeatedly addresses Denial by exhibiting cultural diversity or that repeatedly counteracts Defense by invoking the Golden Rule in our treatment of others. While these kinds of programs do need to be presented to each new wave of students, they need to be followed by programming that more directly addresses how to understand one's own and other cultures, and ultimately how adapt to cultural difference.

Adaptation. When people are able to experience events from another cultural perspective, even to a small degree, they are ready for Adaptation. Everyone involved in a cross-cultural interaction tries to adapt as much as possible to everyone else in the interaction. This involves people drawing on an expanded repertoire of behavior, and realizing that they can behave differently in different contexts while remaining authentically themselves.

Successful mutual adaptation yields *virtual third cultures* – new contexts that emerge intentionally from particular cross-cultural interactions. The value of cultural diversity for education (or for anything else) depends on the creation of these third-cultural contexts. There is no intrinsic value in the existence of cultural difference on campus – the value comes from diverse people generating new behavior and ideas as they try to adapt to each other.

Integration. As people become better and better at adaptation, they may lose their sense of identity as rooted in a single culture – they become *culturally marginal*. The struggle at this point is to integrate an easy shifting of cultural perspective with a stable identity. This is accomplished through *constructive marginality*, where identity is clearly experienced as a process of construction, not as a thing that one has or not.

Any of the more ethnorelative positions – Acceptance, Adaptation, or Integration – are valuable assets for educational institutions. When faculty members are operating from these positions, they are more likely to recognize or design programming that really contributes to the development of intercultural sensitivity and competence. As students are brought into these positions, universities will be closer to fulfilling their potential as exemplary models of multicultural living and social justice – that is, they will be interculturally competent . In this way, and probably only in this way, can universities truly be educating for ethical global citizenship.

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