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TURNING CROSS-CULTURAL CONTACT INTO INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

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SUMMARY

This topic addresses the central topic of *the internationalization of higher education in the current international economic context facing neoliberal globalization*. As institutions of higher education continue to internationalize, the number of exchanged students and professors climbs ever higher. Over a quarter of a million US higher education students were studying abroad in 2010/11, a 4% increase from 2009/10. The Erasmus program in Europe sponsors a similarly growing number of participants – 180,000 in 2009. Wherever they are able to do so, it appears that students are seeking international experience as part of their higher education program. The implicit and often explicit expectation by both students and sponsoring institutions is that study abroad generates educational value. But is this true? There never has been any compelling evidence that study abroad is superior to study at home in terms of the acquisition and comprehension of knowledge or concepts. Rather, educators have believed that having some kind of international experience was part of being “an educated person.” Central to that belief is the assumption that cross-cultural contact generates “international sophistication” that can be used by students in their subsequent lives and careers. However, increasing evidence shows that simple cross-cultural contact is not particularly valuable in itself. For the contact to acquire educational value, it must be prepared for, facilitated, and debriefed in particular ways. The paper summarizes the case for why intervention into educational exchange is necessary to change simple cross-cultural contact into intercultural learning.

INTRODUCTION

I have worked with secondary and higher education programs in the Americas, Europe, and Asia and with foreign students from all over the world for over 40 years. During that time, I have found a similar pattern. The cross-cultural contact, at least if it involves some cultural immersion, is profoundly moving. But the cross-cultural contact does not automatically translate into intercultural learning. In other words, the mere experience of being in another culture, even of being immersed in another culture, does not necessarily translate into either specific knowledge about that culture or transferable principles about intercultural relations.

To talk about this discrepancy, I have found it useful to define the terms commonly used in international exchange in the following way (Bennett, 2010):

- The term “international” refers to multiple nations and their institutions, as it is used in “international relations.” When “international” is used to modify “education,” it refers to curriculums that incorporate attention to the institutions of other societies, and it refers to the movement of students, faculty, researchers, and other academics across national borders. For instance, “Our international education program incorporates foreign students and returned study-abroad students into an effort to internationalize the curriculum of the university.”
- The term “multicultural” refers to a particular kind of situation, one in which there are two or more cultures represented. For example, “The international university had a multicultural campus, with more than 15 different national and ethnic cultures represented.”
- The term “cross-cultural” refers to a particular kind of contact among people, one in which the people are from two or more different cultures. For example, “On a multicultural campus, cross-cultural contact is inevitable.”
- The term “intercultural” refers to a particular kind of interaction or communication among people, one in which differences in cultures play a role in the creation of meaning. For example, “The cross-cultural contact that occurs on multicultural campuses may generate intercultural misunderstanding.” The term “intercultural” may also refer to the kind of skills or competence necessary to deal

with cross-cultural contact. For example, “Administrators of cross-cultural programs need intercultural skills to be effective.”

A possible limitation of international exchange of the type discussed in *Universidad 2012* is that it is focused on international cross-cultural contact. Such as focus may limit the ability of exchanges to generate intercultural learning that can transfer to other international contexts and be applied to domestic multicultural contexts.

THE CLAIMS OF INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE PROGRAMS

International exchange in higher education has transcended its history as a “grand tour” for the leisure class and the more plebian “junior year abroad.” Now university study abroad encompasses massive mobility of students among universities in the United States, the European Union, and a myriad of other consortia throughout the world. Programs now exist of different durations, destinations, and foci that go well beyond traditional study to include internships, service learning, and other educational opportunities.

However, a basic tenant of international educational exchange and study abroad has remained unchanged. Every program, no matter at what level, format, or focus, continues to claim that educational cross-cultural contact contributes to intercultural competence and thus to global citizenship. Whether that citizenship takes the form of transnational European, or international American, or citizen of the world, it is based on the idea that exposure to cultural differences is “broadening” and therefore a legitimate aspect of education in the modern world.

Although the concern is not new (Bennett, 2009; Vande Berg, 2009), the rapidly expanding horizons of study abroad have given new urgency to the question of exactly what is meant by “global citizenship” or “intercultural competence,” how they should be addressed pedagogically in programs, and how they should be assessed. A related question is how governments and school systems can differentiate bone fide study abroad from student tourist programs and how they can provide appropriate support to the educational programs.

THE LIMITS OF CROSS-CULTURAL CONTACT

In itself, cross-cultural contact can generate a reduction of stereotypes and an increase in tolerance, however it can also exacerbate stereotypes and prejudice (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969; Pettigrew, 2000). The key is whether “power” is relatively equal or not. If it is not, as is the case where contact is between tourists, colonists, expat managers, or immigrants and a host culture, both sides more often come away with increased prejudice. This is why citizens of neighboring nations are not necessarily good at communicating with one another, and native-born members of national groups are often

the most prejudiced against immigrants to their country. In the case of study abroad, students generally associate with other students of similar status, and in some programs they may be hosted by local families. Thus, without any additional attention, study abroad generally is associated with decreased stereotyping of the host cultures.

There are two major limitations to this advantage of cross-cultural contact. One is that the reduction of stereotypes is restricted to the target culture. Students who visit Nicaragua from Cuba indeed reduce their prejudice towards Nicaraguans, but this tolerance does not necessarily transfer to other South American cultures, much less Chinese or African cultures. The other limitation is that a lack of prejudice is not a particularly useful base for intercultural communication. Tolerance may preclude hostility against people of the other culture, but if one fails to acknowledge the appropriate cultural differences, understanding is also precluded.

If cross-cultural contact is long enough and intense enough, a certain amount of assimilation may occur. By assimilation I mean the relatively unconscious process of acquiring aspects of an alternative worldview – generally, different attitudes and behaviors that are more common in the target culture. While the result of this assimilation may be improved communication in the target culture, the improvement is again restricted to that culture. If a foreign student is immersed in Italian culture for a year, he or she is likely to acquire some Italian habits. However, in addition to those habits not serving the student well in other cultures, they may also create more severe “reentry shock” when the student returns home.

INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

The definition of intercultural learning is:

Acquiring increased awareness of subjective cultural context (world view), including one’s own, and developing greater ability to interact sensitively and competently across cultural contexts as both an immediate and long-term effect of exchange (Bennett, 2009)

The primary aspect of this definition is the idea of *context*. The term is often used casually to refer to some objective circumstance, such as “in the context of an Italian family, food represents love, ” or “in the context of this sentence, the verb implies direct action.” In this sense, the term is true to its Latin root: to weave together (circumstances) and its Middle English application, to create a text. But a more rigorous use of the term implies a kind of relativism of perspective. For instance, a therapist might explore the context of a patient’s delusions, a politician the context of his opponent’s argument, or an interculturalist the cultural context of a decision-making strategy. It is in this latter sense that the term is used in this definition of intercultural learning.

Culture can be thought of as *context* in both the objective and subjective sense of the term. Objective culture (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) is the set of institutional, political, and historical circumstances that have emerged from and are maintained by a group of

interacting people. So, for instance, Germans interact with one another (facilitated by a common language) more than they interact with Italians. The institutions generated by Germans to enable and regulate their interaction among themselves with their unique historical circumstances become the objective context of Germans, or German Culture. Elsewhere (Bennett, 1998) I have called this distinction “Big-C” culture, as opposed to “little-c” subjective culture. Learning about the Culture of foreign countries has traditionally been one of the main educational goals of study abroad, reflected in curricula filled with courses on art, architecture, literature, government, and history.

Subjective culture (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Triandis 1994) is the *worldview* of people who interact in a particular context. It is their unique perspective on how to discriminate phenomena in the world, how to organize and coordinate communication, and how to assign goodness and badness to ways of being. So, for instance, North Americans tend to organize their perception less abstractly than do Northern Europeans, which leads North Americans to more easily coordinate themselves tactically around processes (how to get it done) rather than strategically around ideas (why to do it). It also inclines members of each group to value their own perceptual organization as superior, so that North Americans are generally pleased with themselves for being practical problem-solvers and relatively impatient with extended theoretical consideration. Northern Europeans, on the other hand, tend to evaluate American decision-making negatively as “shooting from the hip” (Stewart & Bennett, 1991).

A cultural worldview does not prescribe or determine the behavior of individuals who share the culture; rather, it constitutes the context in which perception and behavior occur. So, continuing the example from above, both Americans and Europeans can and do coordinate their perception in both tactical and strategic ways, but the context of their respective cultures facilitate doing it one way or the other. For various reasons, a given North American might be more strategic in some situations, and a given Northern European might be more tactical. Cultural patterns ought not be treated as stereotypical categories into which every member of a group fits, but rather as generalizations about group tendencies and as clues for interpreting the behavior of individual group members.

Exchange and study abroad programs have not usually addressed learning about subjective culture as part of their explicit curriculums. At best, some material about the subjective cultural patterns of a target country might be included in pre-departure orientation, or, in the case of study abroad in non-Western countries, a cultural anthropology course might be offered. The curricular imbalance in favor of Culture over culture is ironic, in that the explicit goal of study abroad is more likely to be stated in terms of subjective rather than objective culture. If the educational goal for study abroad were, say, “to learn about the history, politics, and literature of Turkey,” then these days students and their funders would appropriately wonder why travel was necessary at all; information on these topics is easily assessable through study alone, not necessarily study abroad. Instead, the benefit of study abroad outside of language-learning is more

often stated in terms of being on-site in a foreign country, making friends with locals, and in general deriving the assumed benefits of contact with an alternative worldview. In other words, the benefit of study abroad is that it occurs in the context of a different subjective culture.

The aspect of subjective culture that has received the most attention in international exchange is *cultural self-awareness*. Cultural self-awareness is a necessary precursor of intercultural learning, which involves recognizing cultural differences. If students do not have a mental baseline for their own culture(s), they will find it difficult to recognize and manage cultural differences. They may learn something about the target culture, but that kind of culture-learning is different than intercultural learning. Culture-learning usually refers to the acquisition of knowledge about, and perhaps even skills in enacting, a particular foreign culture. Such “emic” knowledge is not necessarily related to general intercultural competence, just as the knowledge of a particular foreign language is not necessarily related to a general competence in language-learning. To acquire general intercultural competence, one needs to have learned some “etic,” or culture-general categories for recognizing and dealing with a wide range of cultural differences (Bennett, 1998).

The latter half of the definition of intercultural learning involves the development of cultural awareness into intercultural sensitivity and competence. These terms follow my use of them in the *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (DMIS) (Bennett, 1993, 2004), where “sensitivity” refers to the complex perception of cultural difference, and “competence” refers to the enactment of culturally sensitive feeling into appropriate and effective behavior in another cultural context (Bennett & Castiglioni, 2004). According to the theory underlying the DMIS, intercultural learning based on these developmental principles is transferable to other cultural contexts, so that a student who develops intercultural sensitivity on an exchange program in France can apply that sensitivity in Korea, or Nigeria, or with different domestic ethnic groups. Of course, the student may know more about French culture than about Korean culture, so he or she will have more ways of expressing competence in France than in Korea. But since intercultural learning includes how to learn about culture, someone going to a new culture can relatively quickly acquire the knowledge that will allow them to turn sensitivity into competence there, as well.

Intercultural learning can be both an immediate and a long-term effect of exchange. In the short term, intercultural learning involves the acquisition of intercultural sensitivity and the ability to exercise intercultural competence in the exchange culture. A middle-term effect is the transfer of intercultural sensitivity and potential competence from the exchange culture to other cultural contexts. The longer-term effects involve the development of global citizenship and/or other manifestations of a permanently heightened awareness and appreciation of cultural difference. These effects can be measured.

MEASURING INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

Following the well-worn path of looking where the light is best, assessment has tended to focus on relatively easily measured variables. For instance, it was (and is) possible to assess Culture-learning with traditional measures of academic achievement, and so that has received more assessment focus than might be warranted by the stated goals of study abroad. Likewise, language acquisition is relatively easily measured, and so it has often become a criterion of accomplishment extending well beyond the goal of language-learning itself. Even subjective measures fall into this syndrome, where answers to the simple question “How satisfied were you with the program” are given much more weight than their ambiguous roots and tentative connection to learning justify.

The frontier of descriptive empirical study is in the extensiveness of the inquiry, both conceptually and longitudinally. For example, Paige et al (2009). They report on findings from the study *Beyond Immediate Impact: Study Abroad for Global Engagement* (SAGE), where a huge number of respondents were asked to reflect on the connection between study abroad in the college years and their subsequent commitment to active citizenship. Examples of such citizenship were participation in local civic activities, establishment of socially oriented businesses or organizations, knowledge production, philanthropy, and voluntary simplicity. Quantitative results from questionnaires and qualitative data from open-ended questions and interviews showed that study abroad was perceived by participants as being a strong influence in a majority of these global engagement activities.

Because of the self-report methodology of these and similar descriptive studies, it is not possible to claim that study-abroad programs “caused” participants to change. Insofar as they claim to show intercultural learning, long-term impact studies must invoke a kind a reverse inference, arguing that more self-reported engagement in volunteer and civic activities can be taken as indicative of intercultural learning having occurred. This is probably a justified assumption – it is difficult to imagine that people who are able to reflect on their experience over such a long period and in the contexts of several aspects of their lives did not experience something like intercultural learning. Still, the claim that study abroad contributes to intercultural learning, and particularly the claim that certain conditions are more or less influential, begs more experimental methodology.

Recently, a technique was developed to translate some qualitative indicators of intercultural learning into valid and reliable quantitative data. The Intercultural Development Inventory™ assesses the ability to perceive and organize cultural differences in increasingly complex ways, as construed by the DMIS (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman, 2003). Intercultural sensitivity has been shown to correlate well with other indicators of intercultural learning, such as “world-mindedness,” and it has shown predicative validity when correlated with homestay evaluations (Hansel, 2005). The

advantage of using such an instrument is that the effectiveness of a program or of particular elements of a program can be assessed using a pre/post/control research design. Because the instrument is geared to looking at how individuals compare to a group (the “Developmental Score” of the IDI), it is quite sensitive to group changes such as those measured in studies of program effectiveness. And because the instrument meets the criteria for inferential statistical methodology, it is possible to directly assess the amount of causality attributable to measured variables.

The IDI was among a constellation of instruments used in the ambitious Georgetown Study (Vande Berg et al, 2004), which tackles the difficult issue of how much duration, how much intervention, and what kind of intervention is more likely to generate change. Findings provide some objective – though still not statistically significant – support for the importance of duration. Data from that study show that the shortest program (13-18 weeks) has a slight loss in intercultural sensitivity, while the longer programs of 19-25 weeks and 25 weeks to a year have progressively larger gains.

A point of correspondence among both the descriptive and the inferential studies is that homestays are an important element of intercultural learning. The Georgetown Study brings some additional statistical detail to that observation, showing that it is not just having a homestay, but spending time with the homestay family that is most correlated with intercultural learning (as implied by an increase in intercultural sensitivity). This finding is consistent with the constructivist roots of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 2004), particularly the observation of George Kelly (1963), here paraphrased: “experience is not a function of being in the vicinity of events when they occur, but rather it is how one construes those events that makes a person more or less experienced.” Study abroad students in the vicinity of homestays do not necessarily have a “homestay experience.” It is their interpreting that experience, typically through relating and communicating with the family, that generates the experience.

The major contribution of the Georgetown Study is that intervention in the learning process is more effective than no intervention. This is shown clearly in the finding that students with significant improvement in intercultural sensitivity were those who had substantial coaching while on-site, those who interacted most with their homestays, and those that balanced contacts to include both host nationals and compatriots. Vande Berg makes the case that it is intervention, not just program design, that is the key to intercultural learning. Pointing to experiential activities such as homestays and internships that were not in themselves correlated with measurable intercultural learning, he suggests that intervention would facilitate students’ construal of the events as intercultural learning experiences.

INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

One way to focus on intercultural learning is to have programmatic elements that present frameworks for construing subjective cultural differences and that provide opportunities for exploring those differences. The traditional form of this intervention has been the pre-departure cultural orientation, wherein exercises in cultural self-awareness, information about cultural differences, and some intercultural communication strategies are included. When done well, these orientations can be quite effective (e.g. Jackson, 2009). I would hypothesize that the closer the pre-departure orientation resembles a substantial training in intercultural communication, the greater the immediate gain in intercultural sensitivity and the greater the intercultural learning derived from the subsequent program compared to groups who receive inferior orientations.

It is also now accepted (but not necessarily practiced) that effective facilitation of intercultural learning includes on-site and re-entry programming. The purpose of on-site programming is to encourage reflection and guide analysis. Guided reflection is necessary to generate the kind of cultural self-awareness that supports intercultural learning – that is, reflection at a cultural, not just personal level. Similarly, re-entry programming demands highly skilled intervention to achieve the specific applications of intercultural competence envisioned by programs, such as the crossover of competence from international to domestic multicultural situations or of civic involvement beyond simply “tolerance.”

Walters, Garii, and Walters (2009) describe how an international experience can contribute to teacher development. They note that there seems to be a crossover from the appreciation of international cultural differences to a respect for domestic cultural diversity. I would add to that observation that the domestic benefit is likely to occur when the international experience is oriented towards intercultural learning. Teachers with international study or teaching experience are then equipped to apply both the reduction of prejudice that they have acquired and also the more sophisticated results of intercultural learning: a general respect for cultural difference and increased ability to adapt to cultural difference. These competencies can then be transferred into improved management and better educational strategies in multicultural classrooms. These lessons apply equally to university faculty, who are then better able to facilitate intercultural learning in both international and domestic contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

1. Budget time and resources to facilitate intercultural learning as part of international exchange. No transferable learning will reliably occur without an intentional educational effort.
2. Differentiate cultural generalizations (probability distributions of beliefs, behaviors, or values) from stereotypes (rigid application of generalizations to

every member of a culture. If this is not done, people reject the entire enterprise of intercultural learning.

3. Precede Information or training about a specific culture with “culture-general” training that provides perceptual strategies for observing cultural differences and establishes a scaffolding for specific knowledge.
4. Build on the natural result of “tolerance” from equal-power exchange experiences with systematic intercultural education. This is the key to turning cross-cultural contact into intercultural learning.

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