

# TEACHING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: CHALLENGING IDENTITIES

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## *A RESEARCH PRESENTATION*

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### *EXTENDED ABSTRACT*

While any study of communication can provide opportunities for reflection, the study of intercultural communication challenges both teacher and students. Students bring to the class their identity (which is a social construct) and their own sense of self (which is internally perceived). Through their interaction with the concepts and content of the discipline they face challenges in acknowledging and accommodating other ways of doing and being, and thus to the social construction of their own sense of self (Gudykunst, 2003).

In an intercultural communication class, eleven of the twelve students had been born in a number of countries other than that in which the teaching took place and three quarters had arrived shortly before the class commenced. As immigrants or sojourners studying intercultural communication, the students faced considerable challenges in reconsidering the nature of their identities and the construction of their sense of self simultaneously in their personal and academic lives. The processes of “deculturation and acculturation” are necessary in order to “accept and acculturate to a new culture” (Kim, 2001, p.12) and these experiences are inevitably accompanied by stress (Kim, 2015). Moving to a new society and studying intercultural communication each offer transformative opportunities to adaptive individuals but each may also prove too challenging for those who lack the necessary willingness and skills.

When both situations occur concurrently, with a student studying intercultural communication at the same time as being, or becoming, an international student, the pressures associated with loosening cultural ties intensify. The processes of deculturation and acculturation also take time. When the time is condensed and challenges are rooted in both personal, lived experience and the pressures of academic study, the potential for greater disruption of the students’ frameworks is increased. In the class reported on despite the brief time and the intensity of the students’ experiences, there was considerable evidence of the students’ individual adaptation, of academic achievement and the growth of a group culture. Students performed academically beyond expectation and the discussions in class and in assignments provided evidence of this learning being integrated into their personal lives. What enabled the students to make the necessary transitions?

Much of the answer lies in the factors of experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse considered by Mezirow (1991) as integral to transformational learning. Many of the students were able to bring previous intercultural experiences to the class. Early in the semester a class culture was established in which thoughtful discussion on readings and theories was shared by students and teacher with personal illustrations, comment and humor. The students’ individual journeys were undertaken with critical reflection and rational discussion shared with others who were on parallel journeys. This suggests that the shared nature of the experiences, prompted by the critical reflection encouraged by the academic study, enhanced the transformative effect of the intertwined experiences and supported the students in adapting to the new cultural environment and in their academic progress.

The perspectives arising from the experiences of the students and teacher of this course are applicable in other disciplinary settings where students can be challenged to engage with questions of identity and expand their perspectives.

### **SELECT REFERENCES**

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